

CUS417/54.8
World's work, Sept/25.

A Family Physician for Three Nations

A Review of Dr. Cushing's Biography of the Late Sir William Osler

By CAMERON ROGERS

WHEN Sir William Osler died in 1919, his old friend and colleague, F. C. Shattuck of Boston, said of him:

"He has made no profound or fundamental discovery; but no one of our day has, in his life, teaching and example, so radiated, far and near, an inspiration to his fellow physicians."

Perhaps no more accurate estimate than this may be arrived at. Osler was not, primarily, an experimentalist in medicine, an explorer constantly in search of new forms and organisms. He was, first and foremost, a naturalist devoted to the study of existing conditions and his original contributions to the knowledge of medicine, while significant, like those papers dealing with the deposition of coal pigment in the lung tissues of miners and on chorea and choreiform affections, abdominal tumors and angina pectoris, were not in the widest sense of the utmost importance. It was the personality of the man himself, his unparalleled abilities as a teacher and clinician, and his origination

of a method of applied precept in instruction, and above all his treatment of patients, that have endowed his memory with the credit of having to a great extent revolutionized modern medicine.



DR. HARVEY CUSHING
Biographer of Sir William Osler.

He was born in Bondhead, Canada, in 1849, and was successively schooled at Weston, Trinity College, Toronto, and McGill University in Montreal, from which he was graduated in medicine in 1872, returning after two years' study in Europe to become Professor of Physiology and Pathology in 1874. As pathologist to the Montreal General Hospital he began to attract wide attention by a series of brilliant medical papers that identified him as a physician of a new school whose studies were illuminating in

countless obscured professional problems.

Dr. S. Weir Mitchell in Philadelphia and Dr. Pepper, chief of the Philadelphia Medical School, saw in him the type of man that they had long wanted for the position of clinical professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and in 1884 they persuaded him to leave Mont-

real. In Philadelphia Osler became at once a potent ferment among his colleagues, and his autopsies in the Blockley Hospital were famous for their productive thoroughness. Harvey Cushing, in a biography remarkable for its attention to detail and industry in collecting the correspondence of the subject¹, quotes a doctor who at the time of Osler's Philadelphia period was an interne at the hospital:

Osler would begin at eight in the morning and work hard until evening, hunting for hours to find the small artery concerned in a pulmonary hæmorrhage or the still smaller one whose rupture produced a hemiplegia. And having found something of interest he would send out a runner to get all the boys and show what a wonderful thing he had found and how interesting and instructive it was.

It must be remembered here that his primary impulse toward medicine had been lent him by a love for natural history, fostered by the early influence of James Bovell, sometime Dean and Professor of the Institution of Medicine at Trinity College in Toronto. Bovell may, in all justice, be said to have given Osler the physician to the world, for the boy wavered in his enthusiasm between medicine and the Church. The older man was a delightful character, with an intellect of wide and acquisitive scope who, with young Osler, went on protracted outings, searching passionately for algæ and polyzoa of all sorts and they spent hours together on discussions in which Bovell wandered charmingly from medicine into the by-paths of theology and back again to descant on nature and the intelligent use of the microscope. Half a century later, such was his influence over the boy, that Osler was wont in fits of absent mindedness to scribble his preceptor's name upon his writing pad.

His Philadelphia sojourn resulted in a growing fame, this time as much through the widening influence of his personality as through his published work. It awakens our profound astonishment, that, holding as he did a position of growing prominence in medicine and being, there-

fore, one might suppose, a target for the slings of less happily endowed humanity, Osler to the knowledge of every one who knew him, possessed no enemies. Even the objects of his rare and usually justified attacks bore him no personal ill-will for so entirely selfless was his personality that whatever his opinions, none could feel that they were actuated by the desire for personal advancement.

Perhaps a comparison with his friend Weir Mitchell, also a physician of distinction and an author of accomplished parts, will serve to underscore this extraordinary lack of egotism in any form whatsoever. Both men were great physicians, both made valuable contributions to science and both were actively interested in letters. Both were keenly individualistic, but while Mitchell stood apart from his fellows, concerned primarily with his own interests and aware of the successful process of his own existence, Osler moved in an ever-increasing circle of disciples and, indeed, of all mankind, unaware always of anything save the goal he sought, the salvage or the protection of the existence of others.

In 1888 Osler had an offer of the post of Physician-in-Chief and Professor of the Principles and Practice of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, at that time rapidly coming to the fore. Osler completed its achievement. In Baltimore his great powers attained their apogee, his brilliance as a teacher and clinician its ultimate lustre. Beloved as he was by his pupils, he was equally beloved by the patients who underwent his kindly, if penetrating, scrutinies. He was one of the very few physicians of prominence who took the pains to make the patient feel that he was not an animated dummy intended for the experimental diagnoses and tentative pushings and proddings of a group of thoroughly impersonal young men, but a human being benefiting by the consultation of a great doctor with his assistants.

Of middle height, swarthy, heavily mustached, with eyes of a wonderful dark clarity and with swift expressive hands, the physician-in-chief to what he himself

¹"The Life of Sir William Osler." By Harvey Cushing. 2 vols. Oxford University Press. \$12.50.

always called St. Johns Hopkins, would enter the ward arm in arm with one of his young men, perch upon a table and swing his legs, in an impromptu discourse packed with humor and epigram, instil precept and practice into his pupils and confidence and hope into the patient and then as quickly disappear, again arm in arm with an interne perhaps, or a pair of them, leaving both parties still panting gently with excitement and satisfaction and the room charged with an inspired enthusiasm.

And yet his words were not always debonair. Dr. W. T. Longcope, now himself physician-in-chief to the Johns Hopkins Hospital and a friend and student of Osler's in the latter's administration, speaks of the time when in a clinic, before commencing the actual work of the day, W. O. spoke a few words about Dr. Pepper who at that time had been dead for a few years. None of the men in the room had known Pepper and yet after a few short sentences Osler had before him, moved to the point of tears, an audience of men trained in a profession not infrequently abused for its neglect of the sensibilities of emotion.

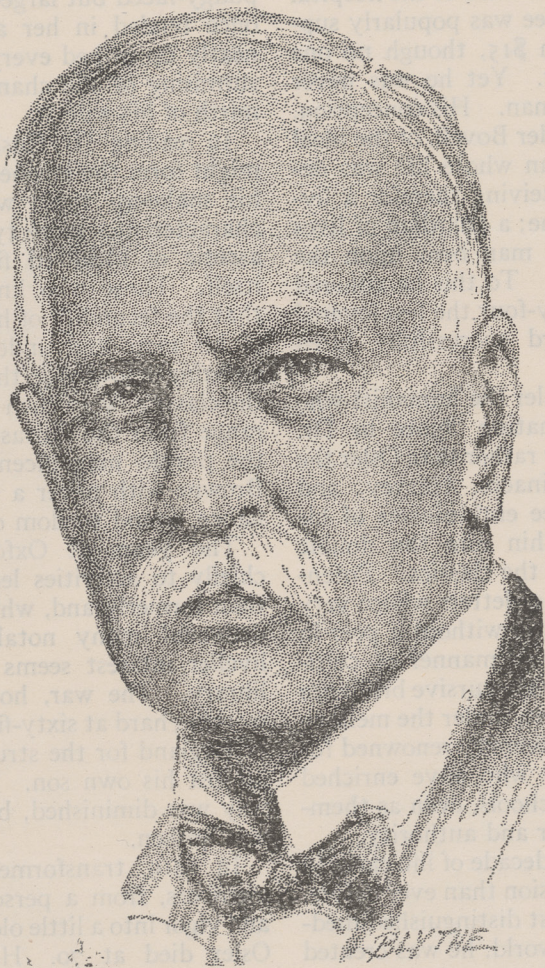
As his reputation grew, so grew also the love for himself as an individual in the hearts of every person with whom he came

in contact. He possessed that infinitely valuable quality of inspiring not only the affection but the energies of the men under him and the significance of his work rests upon this as a solid and irrefrangible basis. Discoveries in medicine made by the men he taught may thus be termed vicariously his own for he was the instru-

ment of initial effort. In the same way tuberculosis and the conquest of its dominion was one of the prime factors of his professional achievement for, though Koch discovered the tubercle bacillus, the names of Osler and Trudeau are linked with his as being men whose every power of organization and prosecution were arrayed against it.

In 1905, to the universal regret of his colleagues, and indeed, to the bereavement of American medicine, Osler resigned his position at Johns Hopkins to accept the Regius Professorship of Medicine at Oxford. There are

many theories as to why in the prime of life and at the pinnacle of his career he should have taken this step, one that was virtually tantamount to a withdrawal from active achievement, a retirement from a field which he so clearly commanded, but the true cause seems to be that he wished to escape the intolerable activity of which his life in the United States had come to



SIR WILLIAM OSLER

be composed. No committee was complete, no public dinner adequate, no consultation fruitful, without his presence and his practice was fast becoming overwhelming.

It was typical of the man, that although he might have commanded nearly any fee, he never charged any one a penny who came into the private ward of the hospital and his own office fee was popularly supposed to have been \$15, though no one ever actually knew. Yet he was never in any sense a rich man. His conception, long ago formed under Bovell, of the ideal physician was a man whose life was devoted to service receiving therefor a living but not a fortune; a guardian of lives and not a business man bent upon the amassing of money. To this he adhered all his life but at fifty-four the less fevered existence of Oxford successfully lured him.

At Oxford it is Osler the humanist who becomes the dominating figure in Dr. Cushing's biography rather than Osler the physician. Like Linacre, Harvey, and Sydenham, the three enthusiasms of his life, he housed within him the double flame of science and the classics. Potentially always a man of letters whose very medical text book, still without a peer in its field, is read by all manner of cultivated men simply for the cursive brilliance of its prose, he became, under the mellowing influence of a university renowned for the great humanists who have enriched the curricula of its schools, even as themselves, a wider power and authority.

Honors in his last decade of life came to him with more profusion than ever before. A member of the most distinguished medical societies in the world, he was created a baronet and was later spoken of for a peerage which he refused to consider. His character, utterly devoid of conscious excellence, repudiated the circumstance of dignity and wealth, especially that variety of the former that is donned like a coat with the acquisition of the latter.

He was wont to astonish and delight the august membership of the Athenæum by stowing bulky bundles in the pockets of their tail coats while they vaguely pon-

dered over the identities of the umbrellas in the hall stand and by slapping them on the back with a resonant and jovial palm. He is remembered by many young men and women to-day for his charming companionship with them, his make-believes and sure swift sympathy, when they were very young, notably by a lady whose pudgy-faced but large-hearted doll W. O. once tended in her absence, tucking it neatly up in bed every night to the wild surmising of the chamber maid and the mirth of his wife.

In reading Dr. Cushing's volumes one might form the erroneous opinion that in his make-up there were none but the characteristics more typical of the active ascetic of idealized fiction than of life itself. Those who knew him remember that the fecundity of his mind, the sanity of his taste and understanding, and the amazing knowledge that he possessed of the classics, were such that his talk could range from the fantastics of Rabelais to the purple magnificence of Sir Thomas Browne with never a loss of wit or brilliance, sound wisdom or sympathy.

The years at Oxford were devoted chiefly to activities less strictly medical than formerly and, while he lectured and delivered many notable addresses, his livelier interest seems to have been his library. The war, however, found him working hard at sixty-five to fit the armies of England for the struggle during which he lost his own son. His service in no way was diminished, but the mainspring was broken.

In 1919, transformed as a friend by new members, from a personality full of fire and vigor into a little old man, Sir William Osler died at 70. He stands without question in the fellowship of Linacre, Harvey and Sydenham. He lived and worked and died beloved by three generations of men and a host of generations will march after him before his name loses its illustrious memories.

Perhaps the noblest of his titles was that one given him by those who worked with him and perceived the inspiration of his spirit. Above all things else he was "the friend of young men."