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THE BIOGRAPHICAL BRAN TUB

The Life of Sir William Osler. By HARVEY CUSHING.
Two vols. (Oxford University Press. 37s. 6d.)

WHEN Callimachus made his celebrated remark about a big book being a big nuisance, he had probably come across some Greek prototype of this work in the course of his researches in the Alexandrian Library—a thought which sensibly diminishes our regret for the action of the victorious Omar. It is an extreme example of the modern fashion for padding out biographies by the inclusion of trivial daily details, uninteresting letters, and extracts from work already printed. Sir William Osler was undoubtedly a great master of medicine, who added much to our clinical knowledge and was an inspiring influence in the various Universities, Canadian, American, and English, in which he taught by turns. But to write his life on the same scale as Lockhart's life of Scott or Morley's life of Gladstone implies a defect, sense of proportion. At a rough computation, Professor Cushing's work contains well over half-a-million words, and it is not written with the rare skill which might excuse this portentous length. Indeed, it is not written at all, in the proper sense of the word. The author confesses that the task of producing a real picture of a human life was a task too difficult for him, and describes his collections as *mémoires pour servir*, as "merely the outlines for the final portrait, to be painted out when the colours, lights, and shadows come in time to be added." Such a work puts before the wretched reviewer, in the words of Scott or Jeffrey, "the doleful alternative of perusing a huge quarto, at the risk of dislocating your jaws, in order to review it—or of reviewing the said quarto, without so perusing it, at the risk of making blunders and furnishing pegs on which charges of misrepresentation will not fail to be suspended." Of course, it may be justly said that books are not written specially for reviewers, but we fear that the present work will appear dull to all but Sir William Osler's intimate personal friends, and to them disappointing. It is a kind of literary analogue to the bran tub in favour at Victorian bazaars, into which you were allowed a dip for sixpence, and out of which you might extract something that seemed worth your whole available capital, or you might not. Let us take a dip or two and see what results.

We open on an account of one of Osler's "high-spirited pranks." He was sitting at lunch in Montreal beside the wife of "a Boston paediatrist," whatever that may be. ~~"Finding the lady devoid of humour, he was led on to describe an imaginary suburb of Montreal across the river—built by an American army surgeon, E. Y. Davis—school-houses, parks, theatres, paved streets, a fine hospital for children—quite a wonderful place—but Davis, poor fellow, had a dreadful end—drowned in the rapids—drunk, they say. There doubtless was much more of this, to the great amusement of the table; but the unsuspecting Bostonians never quite forgave him, for, as was subsequently learned, they spent most of the afternoon in an effort to locate Caughnawauqua."~~ We open again on a passage in which Osler himself sets forth his own philosophy of life: "The quiet life in day-tight compartments will help you to bear your own and others' burdens with a light heart. Pay no heed to the Batrachians who sit croaking idly by the stream. Life is a straight, plain business, and the way is clear, blazed for you by generations of strong men, into whose labours you enter and whose ideals must be your inspiration." A third dip brings up an entry from Osler's diary which reads: "I took a heavy cold, was in bed 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th, fever and schnupfen. No cough. Was to

have sailed on 14th, gave up passage." Another brings up the remark from Sargent that "he had never before painted a man with an olive-green complexion." The next dip is fairer to the book, for it lands Mr. H. A. L. Fisher's admirable description of Osler as he appeared to his Oxford colleagues at the age of fifty-five: "Of course, his great reputation as a physician and medical writer had preceded him, but we immediately discovered that finished competence in his own art and science was but a small part of the man, that the new Regius Professor was the least professional of doctors and the least academic of professors, that he was amazingly devoid of vanity and pedantic inhibitions, that his spirit was free, alert, vivacious, and that there was apparently no end to the span of his interests or to the vivid life-giving energy which he was prepared to throw into any task which fell to him to discharge. Old and young alike acknowledged his mastery and never left his presence without feeling the magnetism of the man and that insatiable, but unobtrusive appetite for helpfulness which made him the prince of friends and benefactors." These two sentences give a better notion of Osler's real charm and ability than can be obtained by toiling through the whole of his biographer's overloaded bran tub.