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NEW YORK WORLD

3 JUNE 1925

First Readings

Dr. Osler, Amplissimus Vir

The reader who shares Asquith's prejudice against the canonical two-volume monument to a departed worthy will pick up Harvey Cushing's "Sir William Osler (Oxford University Press, \$12.50) dubiously. Here are two heavy royal octavos, printed in small type, thoroughly documented, and totaling 1,350 pages. Who was Osler to deserve such tomes? He, with Welch, Halsted and Kelly, initiated the Johns Hopkins Medical School, an important chapter in American medicine; but has Welch or Kelly such a biography? He became Regius Professor of medicine at Oxford, but what other Regius Professor is thus honored? He made no discovery in physiology like Harvey's, none in medical practice like Lister's, none in public health like Ronald Ross's. Yet the lay reader can finish these volumes with a feeling that they are not a page too long, and that his interest has never flagged.

Osler's greatness was not in science or medical art; it lay in his breadth of personality, his force of character, his richness of mind. He was what he liked to call Sir Thomas Browne, *amplissimus vir*. The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table once remarked that American medical men had not half the general culture of American lawyers or ministers. Osler was one of the ripest and fullest of scholars, but he was much more than that. In one of his innumerable polished speeches he declared that a physician might have the science of Harvey or the skill of Sydenham, and yet lack the finer qualities of head and heart which counted far more. "Medicine is seen at its best in men whose faculties have had the highest and most harmonious cultivation," he went on. "The Lathams, the Watsons, the Pagets, the Jenners, and the Gairdners have influenced the profession less by their special work than by exemplifying those graces of life and refinements of heart which make up character." Osler exemplified both the best graces of personality and the keenest qualities of intellect.

A superficial sketch might account for the lesser and outward successes of this Ontario boy of Cornish parentage, who rose so steadily from the early period in Montreal, through the middle period in Philadelphia and Baltimore, to the final period at Oxford. Such a sketch would emphasize his industry, sleeplessly manifest till the war wrecked his constitution. It would give prominence to his purposefulness, which took him abroad

for the best possible training, focussed his energies on important tasks, and kept him married to his work alone till he was forty-three. It would give due space to his genius for organization—a genius compounded of imagination, an instinct for the right helpers, ability to give the primary impulse, and the modesty to withdraw and let others take credit for the final accomplishment. It would mention his rare literary gift. Yet such an outline would miss the deeper qualities which gave him his greatest success—the success of an international and permanent influence.

Perhaps the chief of these qualities was the wide range of his alert and enthusiastic interests. What strikes the reader of this biography is the steadiness with which he grew. By staying in his Montreal laboratory he might have won fame in pure scientific research. He chose to join S. Weir Mitchell and Pepper at Pennsylvania because he instinctively felt himself fitted for a wider field; he expanded still more at Johns Hopkins; and in England his social, literary and historical tastes were strongly nourished.

No one had such an enthusiasm for the medical chapters of literature—Sir Thomas Browne, Burton, Kenelm Digby, Thomas Lovell Beddoes and a host of obscure writers. He amassed a huge and curious library. He had an equal enthusiasm for medical history, worshipping the great figures of the past—Linacre, Boerhaave, Harvey, Sydenham, Gesner, Louis. His proficiency in the classics led to his election as President of the British Classical Association. He helped govern the Bodleian and thrust the Oxford Press into medical fields. All the while he kept abreast of science, maintaining his position as one of the greatest of clinicians and ablest of teachers. And in whatever field he was busy, he infected men with his own enthusiasm and constructive energy.

Dr. Cushing's crowded—sometimes overcrowded—volumes not merely cover his geyser-like activities with thousands of excerpts from his pungent letters, his humorous notes, his earnest addresses; they reveal a man delightfully lovable on his informal side. He had gusto and geniality; as the Lancet said, he made a thousand acquaintances think he regarded each of them as a special crony. "The way he would slap your back," writes a fellow member of the Athenaeum, "and pick your tail pockets while you were reading the telegrams, was delightful." He could not be in a provincial town without visiting the local physician, making a friend, and gleaning and leaving knowledge. He had equally a human touch with his students, with dignitaries like Kipling, who stayed with him at Oxford, and with babes in arms. It is pleasant to have so full a record of so overwhelmingly full a personality. The two volumes will be an enduring reminder to the medical profession of the cultural breadth and force which its members should regard as an ideal.

ALLAN NEVINS.