

# THE MEN AND W

## OSLER, THE TEACHER.

BY MORRIS FISHBEIN.

THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER, By Harvey Cushing. Oxford University Press.

WILLIAM OSLER, known to the vast public largely because of the publicity given to his statement relative to euthanasia for men over 60, was perhaps best known to medical men for his authorship of a textbook on "The Practice of Medicine," which was called the medical students' bible, and of which the nine editions sold 150,000 to 200,000 copies. Osler was the son of a Canadian parson and was intended for the ministry, until of his own accord and under the influence of a preceptor who was scientifically inclined he chose medicine as a career. Indeed, his character and his trend of thought were largely formed by the shaping hands of three preceptors. The first of these, the Rev. W. A. Johnson, possessor of a microscope, gave him opportunity to develop a technic in the use of this modern scientific instrument; the second, Dr. James Bovell, urged him into attendance at McGill university, and the third, Dr. R. Palmer Howard, was instrumental in securing for him his first lectureship and other appointments which started him on the road to fame.

In the first of these two stately volumes Dr. Harvey Cushing gives us much relative to the life of Osler, but unfortunately there is little in the available material to indicate the factors that made for his ultimate success. It is said that he was "straightforward, manly and clean," but the same has been said of Jesse James and Brigham Young. It is interesting to know that he was good in athletic sports and was successful in boxing with the school champion, but that also occurred to all of the heroes of Horatio Alger. In 1874, after graduation from McGill, Osler went abroad. There he conducted some elementary research of considerable interest, established habits of correspondence with medical periodicals which continued throughout his career, and acquainted himself with medical history and with sources of medical material abroad which also was of aid to him later. It is especially significant that Osler gave little attention early in his medical work to the discoveries of Pasteur and Koch, which were beginning to attract widespread attention. Indeed, in a letter relative to an international congress held in London at which such figures as Pasteur, Lister and Koch appeared he dismissed their contributions with the single sentence, "There was an abundant discussion on germs," and, indeed, spent most of his time while at the congress listening to papers on practical clinical topics. Osler never became an adept in bacteriological technic, since the fields of experimental medicine and comparative pathology had more appeal for him.

OSLER returned to Canada from abroad in 1874 and took up the work of a general practitioner in Dundas. The first fee entered in his account book read "Speck in cornea . . . 50 cents." However, he was called shortly to lecture on physiology and histology in McGill university, and from this time his scientific career as a teacher and as a great clinician actually commenced. The students paid fees directly to the instructors, who provided the equipment, and by earning extra money as attendant in the small pox ward Osler was enabled to pur-

chase twelve microscopes and numerous photographs of great leaders in medicine for his class.

With tremendous detail Dr. Cushing tells of the subsequent life of Osler at Montreal, of his call to Philadelphia and of his subsequent removal to Baltimore, and finally of the call to Oxford. Naturally, the Osler home at Oxford became a sort of shrine for American physicians visiting England.

The actual facts of the address on euthanasia may be of interest. Before leaving Baltimore Osler delivered a farewell address. He was himself 55 years of age. In discussing the problems of the university he said:

"I have two fixed ideas well known to my friends, harmless obsessions with which I sometimes bore them, but which have a direct bearing on this important problem. The first is the comparative uselessness of men above 40 years of age. This may seem shocking, and yet read aright the world's history bears out the statement. Take the sum of human achievement in action, in science, in art, in literature—subtract the work of the men above 40, and while we should miss great treasures, even priceless treasures, we would practically be where we are to-day. It is difficult to name a great and far-reaching conquest of the mind which has not been given to the world by a man on whose back the sun was still shining. The effective, moving, vitalizing work of the world is done between the ages of 25 and 40—these fifteen golden years of plenty—the anabolic or constructive period, in which there is always a balance in the mental bank and the credit is still good. In the science and art of medicine young or comparatively young men have made every advance of the first rank. Vesalius, Harvey, Hunter, Bichat, Laennec, Virchow, Lister, Koch—the green years were yet upon their heads when their epoch-making studies were made. To modify an old saying, a man is sane morally at 30, rich mentally at 40, wise spiritually at 50—or never.

"My second fixed idea is the uselessness of men above 60 years of age, and the incalculable benefit it would be in commercial, political, and in professional life if, as a matter of course, men stopped work at this age. In his 'Blathanatos' Donne tells us that by the laws of certain wise states sexagenarii were precipitated from a bridge, and in Rome men of that age were not admitted to the suffrage and they were called *Deponant* because the way to the senate was per pontem, and they from age were not permitted to come thither. In that charming novel, 'The Fixed Period,' Anthony Trollope discusses the practical advantages in modern life of a return to this ancient usage, and the plot hinges upon the admirable scheme of a college into which at 60 men retired for a year of contemplation before a peaceful departure by chloroform. That incalculable benefit might follow such a scheme is apparent to any one who, like myself, is nearing the limit, and who has made a careful study of the calamities which may befall men during the seventh and eighth decades. Still more when he contemplates the many evils which they perpetuate unconsciously, and with impunity. As it can be maintained that all the great advances have come from men under 40, so the history of the world shows that a very large proportion of the evils may be traced to the sexagenarians—nearly all the great mistakes politically and socially, all of the worst poems, most of the bad pictures, a majority of the bad novels, not a few of the bad sermons and speeches."

The next day newspapers throughout the country bore in headlines "Osler Recommends Chloroform at Sixty," and followed with pages of discussion, criticisms and comments as well as letters from "Constant Readers" and "Vox Populi." Finally the word "Oslerize" became a part of the American language. Apparently some of his statements were made on this occasion in a semijocular way, but he never attempted to refute them.

ABOVE all things, the Osler biography brings out the innumerable activities of this man, who apparently was never idle. His interest in medical history, his contributions to medical literature and to the building of medical libraries, his devotion to medical organizations, the manner in which he inspired young men—all of these things become apparent through detail, through personal letters, through anecdotes and through personal reminiscences. The predominant notes of the work, so far as the character of Sir William Osler is concerned, are his essentially prankish nature, his admiration for the classic, his undoubted puritanism, but, above all, the scope of his activities.

In the preface Dr. Cushing makes little pretense to biographical art, modestly expressing his intention to let Osler's story, so far as possible, tell itself through what he puts on paper. The accumulation of this material and the writing of this book have been clearly a labor of love for its author. One can imagine him wishing again and again to discard some letter, some anecdote, and finally determining to include everything in this work. As a result, the story is overburdened with detail, which may have but little appeal for the general reader. However, the notes which occasionally creep into the comment give promise that Dr. Cushing himself may see fit in the future to prepare for the hundreds of thousands of readers who will be interested in the great human figure, Osler, a book somewhat more limited in its scope and far more valuable as an interpretative work.

### He Thumps the Table.



BERNARD SHAW. HIS VIEWS OCCUPY A PART OF "TABLE TALK BY G. B. S." FOR OCCASIONALLY HIS BIOGRAPHER, ARCHIBALD HENDERSON, LETS HIM GET A WORD IN. (Photo from Harper & Bros.)