

SIR WILLIAM OSLER.

"The Life of Sir William Osler." By Harvey Cushing. Two Volumes. (Oxford, Clarendon Press. 37s. 6d.)

(By Dr. C. W. Saleeby.)

What joyful excitement among medical students in Edinburgh just a quarter of a century ago! For Osler, the incomparable Osler, was coming from Johns Hopkins to be our Professor of Medicine. To this great teaching school the greatest teacher in the history of medicine was coming to crown the curriculum of each of us. But influenza laid him low and caused him to change his mind. Edinburgh lost much, and we who should have spent at least two years in his marvellous company lost irreparably, but doubtless mankind at large gained, for the brown little Cornishman's lungs were never made to withstand those Northern winters, and pneumonia, his lifelong enemy, would have killed him many years before it took its war-made chance in the South. Not for himself, but for the human race, Osler hated that disease, with the ardent, steady, laborious hate which he devoted also to typhoid and tubercle; and at the end of his life we were as impotent against it as when he was born, seventy years earlier. All our lung therapy, as he wrote himself from his deathbed, is futile. This is the most deadly of the acute diseases; its toll of life is monstrous, though exacted in a comparatively merciful fashion. A systematic campaign for its prevention—it can largely be prevented—has long been overdue, but when it comes we shall be without the master-physician of the age, whose clinical knowledge always led him on to prevention, and made him one of the life-giving destroyers of typhoid and tubercle and venereal disease.

Born in a Canadian parsonage, William Osler was a very Celtic Celt, but a Celt self-controlled and disciplined, who could set himself so vast a task as the writing of a text-book of medicine, and keep it up to date through endless editions—for it has never been equalled, has gone into almost all languages, and into not only medical libraries, but the travelling trunks of most American ladies for several decades. First of all, and next, and to the end, we must learn, and all medical progress depends upon the teaching given to him who is to become the learned doctor. Osler was in the very first class in half-a-dozen fields, but, above all, he was the tireless, kindly, irresistible, iconoclastic but conciliatory reformer who, when called to the United States from his chair in Montreal, found medical education in that great country at a shockingly low level, and raised it, by his personal genius, to its present glorious status. In his native Canada, in the land of his adoption, and during the last fourteen years of his life, as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, Osler taught medicine, and, by means of his text-book, is teaching it still, as no man has ever taught it before.

He is fortunate in his biographer, Dr. Harvey Cushing, who now occupies, in the surgery of the brain and spinal cord, the place long held in this country by Sir Victor Horsley. The author's name and his subject will ensure for this fine piece of work an enormous sale in the United States, which owes even more than any other country in the world to Osler, for he "made it possible for medical students in America to work at the bedside in the wards." The great doctor had a wonderful pen. No member of his profession since Sir Thomas Browne, his own favourite and exemplar, has written as well as he did. From his published addresses and his private letters Dr. Cushing has contrived to let him tell his own story in most fascinating fashion. To read it is an inspiration, as it was to meet that black-eyed, kind-hearted man in the flesh. It makes one feel mean and idle and trivial. Not that Osler was incapable of playing, or above practical joking—far from that. During nearly the whole of his life he was a teetotaler, and why should he have been anything else, for he illustrated in each decade the epigram of Goethe, that "Youth is drunkenness without wine"? He was a Celtic extrovert, flowing freely with life all the time: nothing from without was required to unlock the treasury of his heart and mind—a treasury indeed, and not a grave, of knowledge, to quote from Sir Thomas Browne himself.

He had a master-mind, incredible industry, a memory which, as revealed in his letters, makes any ordinary person feel like Sir John Macalister, who plainly tells us that he can remember only the date of "the battle of Waterloo, 1066"; but the quality which made Osler consummate was none of these. It was that all-loving heart, which surpassed the skilled eye and ear in the sick room, and the encyclopaedic scholarship in the academic theatre or on the platform. This it was which gave him his power to bring men and countries and clashing, vested interests together, to transcend the pitiful Chauvinisms which disgrace the art of healing—as if we were not "all red inside," as someone told him—and to work with men like Sir John Macalister for the creation of the Royal Society of Medicine and the Fellowship of Medicine, which now so greatly serves the English-speaking world and the cause of Anglo-American friendship. There was genius in his personal manner: he never gave offence, yet, as Dr. Cushing says, no one could speak consecutively to him against his will, and yet his house in Baltimore was known as the "Open Arms," and, as Sir Humphry Rolleston told a vast audience on the wireless the other evening, all his professional assistants had latchkeys to his home! What manner of man was this!

He died in 1919, his resistance against his old enemy having been sapped by the loss of his beloved son, Revere, in the war. We should have had another fifteen years of him. He was called the "Young Man's Friend," and young men of medicine now have need of him. He would have guided and inspired them in the new age which dawns, now that the great preventible diseases which he hated are being wiped out. It is an age of more than preventive, of nothing less than creative medicine, wherein the factors of health of mind and body are being defined and applied from infancy, nay, during expectant motherhood, as in the conquest of cretinism by iodine. The great medicine man who despised practically all medicines would have been a mighty champion in that reform of medical education which will teach the laws of nutrition rather than the limiting doses of a toxicological armamentarium, and will ultimately supersede even the art of medicine itself by an enlightened vision of the art of life. To this end, in some womb or cradle or scholar's closet somewhere may Heaven now be maturing for us another Osler, with the poet's power of divine creation upon those around him:—

The gentleman of perfect blood acknowledges his perfect blood:
The insulter, the prostitute, the angry person, the beggar see themselves in the ways of him—he strangely transmutes them,
They are not vile any more—they hardly know themselves, they are so grown.