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SIR WILLIAM OSLER

One Great Physician Writes the Life of Another

The Life of Sir William Osler, by Harvey Cushing; 2 vols.; Oxford University Press.

Dr. Cushing, surgeon-in-chief of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital and professor of surgery at Harvard medical school for the past dozen years, was for several years on the staff of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, under the master physician of whom he writes. Though he modestly calls this work only the "outlines" of the notable and varied achievements of Sir William Osler, it stands nevertheless as one of the great biographies of the year. Into the two volumes of 685 and 728 pages, respectively, he has packed one of the most fascinating life stories imaginable—a story of vital interest far beyond the limits of the medical profession to which it makes its first appeal.

There are many, of course, to whom the name of Dr. Osler suggests little more than his much distorted remark about the uselessness of men over 40 and the desirability of getting rid of them. His remark had been made in whimsical spirit at a banquet given in his honor when he was leaving America for England. He was modestly trying to tell his colleagues that they would not lose much by his migration from Johns Hopkins to Oxford. Taken seriously in many quarters, the remark gave a new verb—to oslerize—to the language, and gave new point to the danger of humor on the part of a man whom the world has come to take very seriously.

Dr. Osler was a native of Canada, an American by adoption, and spent the later years of his busy life in the England of his ancestry. His father, a Cambridge graduate, was a missionary on the Canadian frontier, and there the son was born in 1849, the youngest of a family of nine. He got the beginnings of his medical education at McGill, but he remained a student of medicine as well as a teacher through the next half-century. For 10 years he was on the McGill faculty, and while there made a record of more than a thousand autopsies. In 1889 he went to Johns Hopkins, and in the years that followed he made that school famous to the world over. While there he wrote his famous text book, "Principles and Practice of Medicine", which made him financially independent. In this country and during his later years at Oxford he was the leading medical publicist of his day. He was a man of tireless energy, and his devotion to the great profession of which the whole world recognized him as a leader did not prevent him from work in other fields. He was a book lover who founded and promoted libraries in two worlds, curator of the famous Bodleian Library, and a director of the Oxford University Press, which now brings out this monumental work.

Dr. Cushing naturally gives special emphasis to his qualities as a teacher, to his wonderful genius and friendship, to his cosmopolitan spirit, and to his tact in composing differences among his colleagues. Dr. Osler did not marry until he was 43, and he always advised his medical students to delay marriage until well established in their profession. From 1905 until his death in 1919, at the age of 70, he was in England except for brief visits to America. He did his bit in the world war. He was a physician to the end, taking notes and reading medical books, and when they told him that he would get well, he smiled and said to his nurse: "Ah, sister, we know, don't we?" and his chief regret was that he would not be able to see the post mortem. Dr. Cushing's work is well indexed and has many illustrations. It is written with scholarly thoroughness, and everywhere in the attitude of a loyal friend and devoted pupil toward a great master.