

CU547/54.61

Reviews and Impressions

A WELL-LOVED PHYSICIAN.

LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER. By HARVEY CUSHING. In two vols. The Clarendon Press. 37s. 6d.

The appearance of an authoritative biography of this well-loved physician and scholar has been eagerly awaited, and the task of preparing such a memoir, which was entrusted by Lady Osler to Professor Harvey Cushing, his brilliant pupil and friend, has now been brought to a successful conclusion. Professor Cushing has indeed performed his task not only with extraordinary modesty—it would be impossible for the casual reader to guess at the close association which existed between the biographer and his subject—but also with a high degree of literary skill. The book is dedicated to medical students, "in the hope that something of Osler's spirit may be conveyed to those of a generation that has not known him." The method adopted throughout is to let the story tell itself as far as possible through Osler's own letters, in which his remarkable personality, spirit and character stand out clearly. No appraisal of his professional accomplishments has here been attempted, the author contenting himself, as he says, with giving merely the outlines for the final portrait, "to be painted out when the colours, lights and shadows come in time to be added." Many of these colours, nevertheless, brighten every page of the book, and the "outlines" are of extraordinary interest, not merely to the medical reader, but to the general public also.

The *Life* falls naturally into three main periods—the Canadian period, from Osler's birth in 1849 to 1884; the United States, 1884 to 1905; and the Oxford period, 1905 to his death in 1919. An interesting account is given of his early life at his father's parsonage in the backwoods of Canada, and of his education at various schools, the last of which, the Weston School to which he was sent at the age of 17, played a considerable part in moulding his subsequent career. In after years Osler repeatedly referred to the debt he owed to the Rev. W. A. Johnson, the founder and warden of this school, though not its headmaster, and it was almost certainly under the influence of "Father" Johnson, himself a keen naturalist, that Osler's interest in the microscope and in biology generally was aroused. In 1867 Osler went up to Trinity College, Toronto, with the expectation of taking Holy Orders, but after a year, during which he came more and more under the influence of Dr. James Bovell, lecturer on physiology and pathology, he determined to abandon theology and to go into medicine. From the moment that this decision was taken, he entered into his medical studies with the industry and enthusiasm which characterised his professional relations till the end of his life. In an address to medical students, delivered many years later, Osler commends as essential qualities the art of detachment, the virtue of method, the quality of thoroughness, and the grace of humanity—qualities which were his own to a most remarkable degree. Shortly after his graduation, he was appointed to a professorship at McGill University, and, ten years later, at the age of 35, he accepted the chair of Clinical Medicine at Pennsylvania University. In 1888 he received a call to the famous Johns Hopkins Hospital, where it is not too much to say that his influence and inspiration completely revolutionised the current teaching and practice of medicine. From the outset Osler always insisted that the "value of experience is not in seeing much but in seeing wisely," and he made much of bedside clinical teaching, with special emphasis on practical instruction to small groups of students. It was indeed, as his biographer shows again and again, at the bedside with his students about him that he was at his very best. Many of his spontaneous aphorisms have been preserved and might well be laid to heart by succeeding generations of medical students. Professor Cushing quotes several of these "bedside epigrams," such as:—

Probability is the rule of life—especially under the skin. Never make a positive diagnosis.

Who serves the gods dies young—Venus, Bacchus, and Vulcan send in no bills in the seventh decade.

Common-sense nerve fibres are seldom medullated before forty—they are never even seen with the microscope before twenty.

Believe nothing that you see in the newspapers—they have done more to create dissatisfaction than all other agencies. If you see anything in them that you know is true, begin to doubt it at once.

Osler remained in Baltimore until the final call came to the Regius Professorship of Medicine at Oxford. At a fare-

well dinner given to him in New York he spoke of his three personal ideals—one, to do the day's work well and not to bother about to-morrow; the second, to act the Golden Rule, as far as in him lay, towards his professional brethren and towards the patients committed to his care; and the third, to cultivate such a measure of equanimity as would enable him to bear success with humility, the affection of his friends without pride, and to be ready when the day of sorrow and grief came to meet it with the courage befitting a man. All who knew him could testify to the way in which he lived up to these ideals. The Oxford period is a record of fourteen years of hard work in public and in private; of organizing, teaching, examining, lecturing, writing, and countless other activities connected with the high position he had attained in scholarship and in medicine.

Although Osler's services in connection with public health questions—enteric fever, malaria, tuberculosis and venereal disease—were hardly less notable than those he rendered to the cause of medical education, this is not the place to dwell on them, nor can more than a passing reference be made to his magnificent contributions to medical literature, notably in the preparation of his great text book, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*. There is no question but that Sir William Osler is one of the outstanding figures in a profession which has had no lack of great men, and this exceptionally luminous and comprehensive biography will form a worthy and lasting memorial of one whose charm of personality and sterling worth of character have rarely been equalled, and whose influence upon current medical thought can hardly be overestimated.