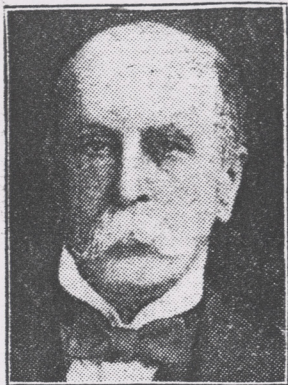


William Osler—Humanist.

THE LIFE AND GENIUS OF A GREAT DOCTOR.



Sir William Osler.

If one were asked the question: "What was Sir Thomas Browne's claim to fame?" one would not reply: "He was a great physician." To his fellow-townpeople of Norwich he was a doctor, with or without special distinction; but to his intimates he was a man of letters, and they knew he was making a beautiful and unique contribution to English literature. We can be confidently definite about Sir Thomas Browne. To a similar question about Sir William Osler, most people would answer, some rather diffidently, that he was a famous doctor. His friends, however, would have no answer ready. Even the just-published biography in two immense volumes, "The Life of Sir William Osler," by Harvey Cushing (Clarendon Press, 37s. 6d. net), makes no categorical answer. Yet, wherever he went his personality left an impression of greatness. Those who knew him have no doubts about it, nor will any reader of this absorbing biography.

A man of parts.

As physician, educationist, writer, scholar in many fields, organizer, and initiator in a vast range of scientific inquiries, his position was a remarkable one. A list of his appointments in England and the New World would fill a column of this journal. Perhaps his chief work was bacteriological research; his observations won for him a leading place among malarial experts. When he was physician-in-chief at the Hospital of the Johns Hopkins University the medical instruction there had the repute of being the best in the world. His text-book on medicine was his most important publication. Its appearance marked a phase in medical history.

But his genius seems to have been specially manifested in the art of living finely. His large knowledge of science and art, and the campaigning energy with which he brought that knowledge to the service of his fellows, were qualities of his fineness of soul.

Osler's ancestors were Cornish people, for the most part successful merchants and shipowners, and his parents were brought up at Falmouth.

Featherstone Osler, his father, went to Canada in 1837 and became a missionary clergyman somewhere north of Toronto, in what was then a wild country. Here William Osler was born in 1849. The parsonage was an old-fashioned household, and, although other reading was allowed, theological books predominated. To the end of his life it gave Osler a shock to see a person reading a novel on the Sabbath.

Learning science.

At a school at Weston, near Toronto, young Osler, when a senior boy, came under the influence of a master who had a deciding

effect upon his studies and his life. This was Father William Johnson, who was something more than a pedagogue; he was a Nature lover and a true scientist. Fifty years later Osler said:—

Ten years with really able Trinity College, Dublin, and Oxford teachers left me with no more real knowledge of Greek and Latin than of Chinese, and without the free use of the languages as keys to great literatures. Imagine the delight of a boy of an inquisitive nature to meet a man who cared nothing about words, but who knew about things—who knew the stars in their courses and could tell us their names, who delighted in the woods in spring-time, and told us about the frog-spawn and the caddis worms, and who read us in the evenings Gilbert White and Kingsley's "Glaucus," who showed us with the microscope the marvels in a drop of dirty pond water, and who on Saturday excursions up the river could talk of the Trilobites and the Orthoceratites and explain the formation of the earth's crust. No more dry husks for me after such a diet.

In 1868 Osler decided that science, and not the Church for which he was intended, should be his calling.

Medical studies.
He entered the McGill Medical School at Montreal—to which he was to bequeath his wonderful library—and, graduating in medicine in 1872, came to Europe. He studied prodigiously, and impressed the eminent scientists with whom he came in contact. All the time he was acquiring that familiarity with general literature which was not the least distinguishing feature of his protean interests. How he compassed it all is a mystery. A letter from England contains a significant passage:—

At Norwich I visited the Cathedral, and saw what I could of the relics of my favourite Sir T. Browne. His skull and a good painting were in the infirmary; his tomb in the church of St. Peter Mancroft.

Browne played a large part in his life. In letters and lectures his references to the author of "Religio Medici" are constant. He made a pursuit of Browne first editions, indeed, of any editions, and acquired the best collection in the world. Dr. Malloch, who attended him in his last illness, has left this note:—

He spoke of the flushed feeling about his head and I tried to explain it, but he said: "Archie, you lunatic! I've been watching this case for two months and I'm sorry I shall not see the post-mortem. At any rate, the books are there; do you know about Michael Angelo and his tomb? So pathetic! Well, it's Michael Angelo and his tomb, and Osler and his library!"

A good talker.
A copy of "Religio Medici" had been his constant companion for over fifty years. He was making marginal marks in it as he lay dying. He liked Browne's "sane outlook on the complex problems of life." Like appealed to like. President Hadley of Yale has written this impression of Osler:—

In two hours of conversation I learned more about medical history and more about the persistence of certain queer traits in human nature than could be got from months of study. . . . What he said was like Smollett and Gibbon: Smollett's frankness without his coarseness, and Gibbon's erudition and lucidity without his conventionality.

In talk of this kind, Mr. Hadley said he had never met Osler's equal.

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