

CUS417/54.64

# Talk About Books

## Mail & Empire Toronto July 1/25

### Well Written Biography of Sir William Osler

About fifteen years ago, when the late Whitelaw Reid was introducing Sir William Osler at a dinner in London, the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James remarked that Osler was "a very excellent example of what the States could do with a Canadian when caught young." If you want a very complete demonstration of how far Ambassador Reid was from the truth of the matter, you cannot do better than read Harvey Cushing's "Life of Sir William Osler." When Sir William Osler went from Montreal to Baltimore to take up work in the Hopkins institutions, his powers were fully developed. He had been trained in the best British and European traditions, and he had already demonstrated his own initiative and ability in the various institutions where he worked in Montreal. Although not entirely a Canadian product, except in character, he was nevertheless well beyond the formative period when he went to make his home in the United States, and his feelings regarding nationality are probably indicated by the fact that he never became an American citizen. These remarks may suggest a rather combative opening to the survey of the life of a man whose career, on the whole, was tranquil. Some Americans who have good friends in the Dominion wonder why it is that Canadians often assume such a bristling attitude towards the States. One of the reasons is because so many prominent citizens of the Republic make inept remarks like that of Ambassador Reid.

Here in Canada, it is trite to say that the Rev. Featherstone Lake Osler, who came to this country as an Anglican missionary-rector, was the father of the most brilliant family ever born in Ontario. All his children distinguished themselves in some walk of life, and the most illustrious of the nine was his youngest son, Sir William Osler, born July 12th, 1849. Harvey Cushing tells us the birth of the son was announced to the citizens of Bond Head when the Orangemen's procession called at the rectory. The Orangemen insisted that "the newcomer, of whose arrival they were made aware by his being brought out in his father's arms, should be 'William.' He was promptly dubbed the 'young Prince of Orange,' and an anti-Popish acrostic on his name was composed, in the last line of which he is bade to 'Remember all thy fathers bled to gain.' Hence William he came to be christened, and decked out in appropriate colors with a broad sash of orange and blue he was brought out on the parsonage verandah on his later birthdays to greet the procession which the other children came to regard as arranged solely in his honor."

It is because the biography contains so much intimate material like the above paragraph that it proves as fascinating to the layman who is interested in Sir William Osler as a great man as to the members of the medical profession who will regard it as the life story of a great doctor. A generous portion is devoted to his boyhood, and to his early education. When attending Trinity College School, then situated in Weston, William Osler had it in his mind to enter the Anglican ministry. He was an earnest and devout boy, and his dynamic force and sterling character made him a leader. The course of his career was largely shaped by two Anglican clergymen who had a strong influence over the youth. One of them was the Rev. Father Johnson, whose struggles for his High Church convictions are still a tradition in the town of Weston, and the other was the Rev. James Bovell. In the end, William Osler turned from theology to medicine, and started on a course that was to make him famous first in Canada, then in the United States and finally in England.

In many ways, this early decision colored his view point all through life. Twenty years ago, when he consented to deliver an Ingersoll lecture at Harvard on "Science and Immortality", Americans apparently did not know the scientist's background. Like President Eliot, many persons were disappointed because he gave a beautiful rather than a destructive essay. The biographer says: "The only portion of the address that met with Mr. Eliot's genuine approval was the brief reference to the study Osler had made of the last sensations of the dying. For the head nurses in the wards had taken down at his request, for some time, the exact words of dying patients. The majority gave no sign one way or the other; like their birth, their death was a sleep and a forgetting." Raised in a rectory, destined in his early days for the ministry, conversant as few men of his time with Holy Writ, a thorough-going Christian, to stand before a lay audience and discuss with frankness, clear sanity and kindness of spirit whether 'mankind's conquest of nature has made the individual more or less hopeful of a life beyond the grave' must have been an ordeal."

An entire chapter is devoted to Osler's more famous speech which

gave the language a new verb "to oslerize". Never has such a small match started such a big conflagration. Harvey Cushing shows in detail how the accusation that Dr. Osler advocated the chloroforming of all men over sixty years of age was due to an entire misconception of what he had said—words were torn from the context and misinterpreted. In the famous address, Osler quoted from a little red novel by Anthony Trollope, "The Fixed Period", in which some such idea was set forth, and the speaker's references to Trollope's suggestions were entirely whimsical. Nevertheless, the storm broke, and for weeks Osler was the subject of cartoons and comments; caustic, abusive and worse. It should have required no great degree of intelligence to distinguish between the serious and the jokey in what Osler had to say, and it is regrettable that his remarks should have been brought before the public in such a ridiculous guise. And yet all sorts of official explanations were necessary to set things straight, and the matter caused Osler much anguish in mind, for he had no feelings of malice towards old men. Indeed, Cushing tells us that he had a special fondness for them. The whole thing was rather a reflection upon a certain type of newspaper enterprise. An authority is quoted who says that Osler was an example of a popular idol victimized for the purpose of making entertaining "copy", and held up to undeserved scorn and ridicule for as long a time as the topic could be kept alive.

The biography is divided into three sections—Osler in Canada, Osler in the United States and Osler in England. The author has managed to avoid being unduly technical, and has succeeded in suggesting how much of genuine interest there was in a life that was spent in surroundings not usually considered romantic. The reader will get a clear conception of the man, and carry away the impression that his tremendous success was as much a matter of character as of mind. During his years at McGill he was described as its "potent ferment". Wherever he went, the same remained true of him to a very large degree.