

THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER

Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1925.

Two Volumes - 1375 Pages.

The methods of the biographer are, to a certain extent, prescribed for him by the recency or the remoteness of the life he is recording. In writing of Osler, Dr. Cushing was confronted with a task rendered unusually difficult by the fact that, though the world lost Osler in 1919, his spirit, his authority and his vision are still living forces in the development of American and British medicine. Another, and perhaps a shorter life of Osler will some day be written in which his immediate effect upon the present generation will be subsidiary to his permanent contributions ^{to his period} ~~as a great physician and an essayist~~ -- in which he will take his rightful place near Huxley -- and next to his beloved Thomas Browne.

For the time being, however, considered from the point of view of continued influence upon medicine, in our country at least, Osler has not yet died. His wisdom and his leadership are still at work among us. The purposes for which he laboured, many of them just beginning to approach realization, are being guided by

the young ^{associates} ~~assistants~~ and pupils whom, directly or indirectly, he inspired. In problems of training, in medical school and hospital organization -- particularly in ~~the~~ matters concerning ^{the} individual and public responsibility of the medical profession his wise and earnest counsel, prophetically a half-generation ahead of his period, is more directly applicable and in some respects more needed than it was when it was uttered. His Text Book is still upon the shelves of most English-speaking physicians, and the merry sagacity and comforting optimism of his essays deal with problems that have changed but slightly during the intervening years.

Dr. Cushing, thus, is writing of a contemporary whose mind is still a guiding force and has not yet become pure memory; and he has wisely chosen, therefore, to record instead of attempting to paint in an elaborate background of appraisals and appreciations. The story of Osler's growth and the quality of his spirit are developed from simple descriptions of events, from letters and from extensive quotations from Osler's own writings.

A criticism that has been and will be made concerns the length of the work. It is about twice as long as Renan's Life of Christ, easily three times that of Vallery Radot's Pasteur. And, indeed, there may be some justice in this reproach. Dr. Cushing is a distinguished brain surgeon, and the habit of picking about among the delicate wirings at the base of the human skull breeds a passion for detail that may have run away with him; and so, to the lay reader it will seem that a consid-

erable number of letters from and to relatively unimportant people have been permitted to swell the volumes into occasional tediousness. In part this is probably due to the large number of surviving friends, pupils and casual acquaintances who, in all likelihood, poured in a deluge of material for the biographer's confusion. We are inclined to question, however, whether much that is present could have been omitted without detracting from the value of the work, which is far more than a biography of Osler. For, through the eyes of one of the great physicians of his period we obtain a unique picture of what may be termed the heroic age of medicine. Osler's professional life extended from the early days of Pasteur and Koch to the modern bacteriological laboratory; from the time when surgeons operated in black frock coats, with red velvet pin-cushions on their waistcoats, through Lister and Billroth to the modern operating room. He learned to do autopsies from Virchow. He knew Huxley, Brown-Sequard and Charcot. He saw the birth and fostered the development of the present public health movement. Within the relatively short span of his active years the foundations of modern medicine were laid, a golden age of progress which left many behind, but with which he grew and in which he remained, to the very end, one of the most hopeful and youthful, and always representative spirits.

Osler's effect upon the reformation of medical organizations in this country, where his really significant work was done, was acknowledged before his death, and in spite of the sweeping changes of method that very recent years have seen, there

is little question in the minds of the well-informed that the new vigour and progressiveness which led to such changes was brought to every institution, in turn McGill, Philadelphia and Baltimore, to which he came. That his early work at the Hopkins, together with Halstead, Welch, Mall and Kelly must be regarded as the true beginning of rational medical education in the United States is a matter of history, though he himself gives proper credit to the earlier impulse in this direction given by President Eliot's "sweeping changes in methods of teaching" at the Harvard Medical School. In spite of these purely professional achievements, however, it seems quite certain that he would not have left the great impression upon his generation which makes him a dominating figure, had he not, at the same time, been a great personality. In one of his last American addresses, in that much misquoted and misunderstood discourse upon the most effective period of human life, he paraphrases an old saying which seems to us to characterize his own development. "A man", he says, "is sane morally at thirty, rich mentally at forty, wise spiritually at fifty - or never." He himself realized these stages of progress in their proper turns and spent these fine qualities lavishly and without condescension in the service of those who had not yet attained them; for the chief passion of his life seems to have been the beginner and the young medical colleague, and no man has left behind him a richer legacy of young disciples, whose debt to him and affection for him ^{was} so clearly set forth by one of them in Dr. Cushing's book.

One is led to wonder, in considering the influences which shaped the richness and depth of Osler's mind and heart, whether he would have developed equally under the circumstances prevailing at the present time. His later achievements and the capacity by which he transformed observation into wisdom were built upon a singularly thorough culture in what are generally spoken of as the humanities. Will it be possible, under the conditions which necessitate a constant augmentation of requirements in the fundamental sciences for our prospective physicians and surgeons to maintain the intellectual standards by which the older education produced men like Osler, Delafield, Jacobi, Bull, Welch, Shattuck and many others whose great influence upon the medical life of their period is largely traceable to the fact that their professional growth was superimposed upon a broad general cultivation? When, under our system, Osler would have been devoting himself almost exclusively to physics, chemistry and biology, say at seventeen, he was passing examinations in algebra, trigonometry, the Catechism, Roman history, Terence and Sophocles, and was laying the foundation of a depth of general understanding, ^{an} enthusiasm for ideas and of a moral balance that distinguished him from his fellows even more definitely than his purely professional achievements. It is a puzzling problem, for we cannot of course afford to abandon any of the scientific ground that has been gained; and the accumulating contributions of the fundamental sciences to medicine will progressively increase the evil in requiring a ^{progressively} ~~continually~~ more thorough foundation in chemistry, physics and mathematics. It is even possible that, as medical training is forced into channels not unlike

those prevailing for the education of engineers, men and women of the Osler type of kind - necessary as they are to our profession - will be less and less attracted to it. The answer - if there is one - probably lies to a considerable extent in a thorough revision of secondary education, between which and technical training an increasing gap has become apparent, and in ^{European} foreign countries it would seem to us the cultural background has been pretty well established before the age of twenty. Moreover, as concerns the conduct of medical schools themselves, it may be well to realize that medicine is many professions and not a single one, and that it may be feasible in the future to liberalize entrance requirements, offering the highest scientific opportunities to those inclined by endowment and taste to pursue the experimental and more distinctly scientific branches of the profession, but making room, on a minimum schedule, for others who - like Osler - would develop most naturally in purely clinical and humanitarian directions. Indeed, if one makes an impertinent habit of inquiring, one should not be, but is astonished to discover how large a percentage of the most distinguished, successful and superbly skillful physicians, surgeons and practising specialists have little memory, no comprehension and almost no need for the fundamental principles of science which they once studied and which are indispensable to the laboratory and clinical investigative branches. When they do use the results of laboratory progress, as they are constantly doing, they use them more or less as the average man uses a watch - without knowing exactly how it works. There may be some way by which this type of medical man can get enough of the fundamental training which he

needs to comprehend the progress without dwarfing his education in other directions. It must be accomplished without lowering the standards or opportunities for intensive scientific training offered to the others, and the minimum required of all medical men must be sufficiently comprehensive to give the future clinician the mental equipment by which he can keep abreast of technical progress. Eventually it may be necessary to surrender to the inevitable and admit that preparation for medical training necessitates a specialization in the pure sciences so intense that only the exceptional individual can find time or opportunity for development in other directions. For the present, however, a sensible compromise is possible and we cannot afford to lose the Osler type in medical life.

It is interesting to note also that though the foremost reformer of medical teaching in this country, Osler has little sympathy with the so-called "full time" plan of clinical organization; and whatever may be said for or against this much embattled cause, it seems quite certain from a study of Osler's character that he would not have been happy under such a plan nor nearly as useful to his profession and his generation at large. It would have cramped the style of a man of his calibre, whose self-imposed control was quite surely a better measure of his proper course than any institutional restrictions. The answer is that full-time professors are born and not made. Osler was not born a full-time man and nothing could have made him one without contracting the wide horizon of his influence. A study of prevailing needs and of the value of men of the Osler type would seem to indicate that no medical school in the future will be complete unless it provides for clinical investigators whose interests and activities will necessarily make them full-time professors, whatever the institution may say about it, but will also have

welcome for the Oslers, from whom the students will obtain something less easily defined by equally indispensable.

A matter that disturbs the ordinary individual in reading of Osler is his apparent freedom from weaknesses, small vices or vanities. One may admire a paragon of such perfection, but it is rare that one is moved to affection unless some fairly obvious fault or weakness gives one a feeling of fellowship. One has this feeling for Osler, and his pupils and assistants certainly developed it to an astonishing degree, in spite of the fact that with a most searching effort to do so one fails to discover any evidence of a consoling fault. His sometimes Rabelaisian humour, with his keen sense of the ridiculous and his always good-natured and - one imagines - loud laugh, saved him from sanctimoniousness. He was never self-conscious, nothing of a prig, and, though quick to criticize and condemn, his sharpest passages are saved from acrimoniousness by sympathy, charity and a sense of humour.

Cushing's manner of treatment allows these facts to emerge without talking about them, and in this is an unusually skillful performance. The work, besides being an affectionate monument to Osler, will form a very valuable reference book to that period in the development of American medicine when it ceased to be a mere colonial echo of European science and began to lay the foundation for a healthy native growth.