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Concerning the Character and Career of Dr. William Osler

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Revised by Sidney Williams

"My second fixed idea is the uselessness of men above sixty years of age, and the incalculable benefit it would be in commercial, political, and in professional life if, as a matter of course men stopped work at this age. In his 'Biathanatos' Donne tells us that by the laws of certain wise states sexagenarii were precipitated from a bridge, and in Rome men of that age were not admitted to the suffrage. They were called *Deponiani* because the way to the Senate was *per pontem*, and they from that age were not permitted to come thither. In that charming novel, 'The Fixed Period,' Anthony Trollope discusses the practical advantages in modern life of a return to this ancient usage, and the plot hinges upon the admirable scheme of a college into which at sixty men retired for a year of contemplation before a peaceful departure by chloroform. That incalculable benefits might follow such a scheme is apparent to any one who, like myself, is nearing the limit."

The foregoing excerpt from Dr. William Osler's valedictory to Baltimore and Johns Hopkins made famous among the people a physician whose greatness was long before recognized by men of his profession. With the venerable precept of "Old men for council, young men for war" still abroad the idea of chloroforming as superfluous the individual of sixty was seized with avidity. Osler never seriously advocated it. The suggestion that dogged him all his remaining days was uttered in a mood half-sad, half-playful, the mood of the philosophic intellectual in whom slight symptoms of physical decline attend the still ripening intellect. When he uttered his famous words he was fifty-five.

How great a man he was, how fine spirited and stimulative in the advance of medical science, is richly evident in two volumes by Dr. Harvey Cushing, simply entitled "Sir William Osler" (Oxford University Press).

Since publication, a few months ago, this biography has received abundant publicity. Not for illumination of medical science, since Osler's contribution to it is not stressed. Its charm

is in glowing reflection of Osler's purely human qualities. Himself a very distinguished surgeon, Dr. Cushing set himself to express a man.

And so we follow a richly productive life. How the son of a Canadian clergyman, and himself set apart for the church, was turned towards medicine by a teacher scientifically disposed. Osler graduated at McGill, where besides being a promising student he was good at boxing and other sports. Some reasearch work abroad, then he returned to Canada to practice medicine in Dundas. The first entry in his account book was, "Speck in Cornea . . . 50 cents."

He was not destined, however, to remain long in practice. A call to lecture on histology and physiology at McGill was the beginning of his illustrious career as a teacher and clinician. He moved on to Philadelphia, to Baltimore, to Oxford.

Osler's textbook on "The Practice of Medicine" all physicians know. It has been called the medical student's Bible. The inspiration of his lectures many gratefully recall. In discourse he was wide ranging, wisely philosophic, and warmly human. What he touched he humanized. By these qualities he achieved a sort of fame usually reserved for great discoverers and he was not one of them.

While the fields of comparative pathology and experimental medicine engaged his ardent interest, he was little inclined to bacteriological research. Save in this, that he was ever alert for findings of suggestive interest and eager to ascertain the discoverer's impression. His assimilative capacity was extraordinary.

Withal he was a great gentleman, in whom stately courtesy companioned a warm heart. The end of all found him

stoical as *Martius*. Keenly aware of the progress of aggravated influenza, he jotted clinical notes of the development of his illness and sent them with messages of greetings to professional friends, as though he were a physician in attendance upon some patient in whom they were interested. On almost the last day one of the doctors in attendance sought to expound to him some symptom. "Archie, you lunatic!" he said in reply. "I've been watching this case for two months, and I'm sorry I shall not see the post mortem." Then he asked for Sir Thomas Browne's "Religio Medici," and looked for something in it, an annotated page of gorgeous melancholy:

"But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. . . . Who knows whether the best of men be known, or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot than any that stand remembered in the known account of time? Without the favor of the everlasting register, the first man had been as unknown as the last, and Methuselah's long life had been his only chronicle. . . . Oblivion is not to be hired. The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the register of God, not in the record of Man."

In his proud modesty he must have known.