

# OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

No. 21 – FEBRUARY 1976

## THE DISMAL SWAMP

A tale written by William Osler for his son Revere



o few men is given to see the strongest youthful desires fully realized. Mine have been. There were two. To see the giant's bed on St Michael's Mount and to visit the Dismal Swamp.

I could not have been more than four years old when on a glorious August day my sainted mother

took me to the berry patch, on the skirts of the pine forest. The day was hot and after we had filled our baskets we went deep into the cool of the woods. On a bank of moss I sat at her feet as she told me the story of Jack the Giant Killer and how as a girl she had been brought up in Jack's own country and had often visited the castle on St Michael's Mount and had climbed onto the great bed on which the giant sleeps and had seen his club and all the accessories.

Deep in my waxen brain the story was graven never to fade and I do not think that a year ever passed without a fervent desire to see St Michael's Mount. It came when a few years later I took my bride to see my Cornish relatives. Shall I ever forget that memorable day when we drove to the Mount? So often had I looked at the pictures, and the descriptions were so vivid in my mind, that I almost led our pretty young guide to the giant's room. There was the gigantic bed with the gigantic posts, the curtains a little dingy it is true, but the steps were there with which one could climb to the bed. And by the side the enormous club which three men could scarcely lift! As I turned away, having dropped a shilling into a soft palm, I saw my wife's eyes filled with tears of happiness as she felt that my childhood visions had been so delightfully realized.<sup>1</sup>

This weekend of April 1900 a dream of my boyhood has been fulfilled. I have seen the Dismal Swamp! My success in life began with a geography prize – one of Johnston's atlases. I have it and I prize it still. The old fashioned school geography which we studied had many attractive pictures of the great natural objects – Niagara Falls, the cave of Kentucky &c., but the picture which fascinated me and which remains photographed in my mind was that of the Dismal Swamp, with huge cypress trees with snakes hanging from the boughs. Later I read, "Dred, a tale of the Dismal Swamp" and Southey's poem has rung in my ears these

During the Easter recess of April 1900, Osler took a brief holiday in Virginia. On Easter Monday he visited the Dismal Swamp, an area a few miles from Norfolk in the south-eastern corner of the State, shown in maps of the present day as a National Wildlife Refuge. On this visit Osler was accompanied by his Resident Physician at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, Dr. T.B. Futcher, designated as Dr F. in Osler's tale. Many years later, Futcher provided Harvey Cushing with a factual account of their visit to the Dismal Swamp and this was subsequently published by Cushing in his biography of Osler. In his account Futcher wrote: "We motored about the lake in the launch for about an hour and then started on our return trip. On our way back, and while we were eating our frugal lunch, the Chief [Osler] wrote a most imaginative account of our experiences for Revere on the blank pages in the back of Burton's 'Anatomy of Melancholy' which he had brought along with him." This copy of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is now in the Osler Library (vol. 2 of *Bibl. Osl.* 4632). Also in the Osler Library is a typewritten transcript of Osler's account prepared in 1923 by the late Dr. W.W. Francis and entitled by him "A visit to the dismal swamp" (*Bibl. Osl.* 7642). This volume contains an "Addendum," a transcript by Francis of a paragraph intended to follow the tale written in *Bibl. Osl.* 4632. Osler wrote this paragraph on the blank page of a letter which was found among Lady Osler's papers in 1928.

On several occasions Francis read his transcript at a meeting of the Osler Society of McGill University but the tale has not hitherto been published. Permission to publish now was granted by the Board of Curators of the Osler Library at its meeting in April 1975. The tale has been prepared for publication by Philip M. Teigen and Edward H. Bensley.

forty years.<sup>2</sup> I could never pick up an atlas without turning to the map of the United States to refresh my imagination with the vastness of the area indicated, and I invariably made a mental resolve some day to see it. I had read much and thought more of the bands of runaway slaves that lived in its recesses and I knew there were many who had not yet heard of Lincoln's Declaration and I felt that perhaps some day I might be privileged to take the message to them.

1. Francis, in his transcript, recorded that Lady Osler's snort of derision when she read this was worth hearing.

2. The reference is to *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, first published in 1856. Francis noted that he could not find a poem by Southey about the Dismal Swamp. Probably Osler had in mind Thomas Moore's poem "A Ballad. The Lake of the Dismal Swamp," two verses of which appeared on the title-page of Stowe's novel.

All this was long ago. A few years after I moved to Baltimore, one evening after dinner, a party of gentlemen were talking of the Dismal Swamp Canal, and as a shock it came to me that I was within easy distance of realizing the dream of my boyhood. Not until this week has it been possible, but the long delay has only made the reality more real and I have had the accumulated joy of years of anticipation.

We left Deep Creek about 9 one morning in the steam launch of the canal contractor, taking with us an ample supply of provisions and a copy of Lincoln's proclamation. Mentally I had four pictures in connection with the Dismal Swamp. Silent with a deep sense of eeriness, the great cypress trees with divided roots far out of the water, the moccasin snakes, the red lizards that dropped from the trees onto one's hat, and the negroes deep in the recesses of the swamp to whom Lincoln's proclamation was yet unknown. From Deep Creek the canal runs through an uninteresting portion of the swamp for ten miles, and then the launch entered a narrow ditch, the feeder of the canal from the lake, two miles in length. The banks of this ditch are literally roots and peat, with here and there white patches made up of oyster and clam shells of the post tertiary period. A quarter of a mile from the lake is the main lock of the feeder where we found a group of men, chiefly negroes, making a new sluice. As we were locking through, my heart leapt up as I beheld a dug-out canoe, corresponding exactly to the picture in Southey's poem.

The man in charge of the lock we called Sir Michael from an extraordinary resemblance which he bore to our distinguished friend the physiologist. He was both civil and humorous and offered us the hospitality of his garden, as his bungalow was small and full. He received the daily papers which we offered with a visible start which was explained a few minutes later when he asked us to read a letter which the skipper had brought him from Deep Creek.

Through the lock we quickly reached the shoreless lake of the Dismal Swamp, and no sooner had we left the ditch than the first of my visions came true. The launch ran close to the magnificent ruins of a huge cypress, with at least 12 tough roots, all separate, between which a canoe could go, reaching down into six or eight feet of water. The top was battered and leafless, the trunk was bare, but what of that, the giant roots *did* emerge from the water, and light, much light, *could* be seen between them. The lake is surrounded by these remarkable trees which present a strange appearance to one accustomed to northern forests. Lifeless, silent, monotonous, not a habitation visible and nowhere an apparent outlet, the lake of the Dismal Swamp is a — but I must say I returned to our camp a little disappointed.

It was six o'clock before we returned to the lock where we made arrangements to camp for the night. About dusk as we sat smoking around a camp fire, a fine looking young negro called Hamp came up and asked in a hesitating way if one of us was not a doctor. He had that scriptural<sup>3</sup> malady known in Leviticus and among the colored folk as the "running reins"<sup>4</sup> for which Dr F. provided him with sub-

stantial comfort. I was attracted by a remarkable conformation of his right eye which was inserted vertically in the socket and gave him a remarkably ferocious appearance.

As I was examining him, something in his aspect — the phenomenal optic — took me back 6 years ago to the ward for colored patients at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. I found at my visit an elderly negro, jet black but of remarkable intelligence, and with this still more remarkable conformation, at which the head nurse assured me the other colored patients were greatly disturbed as they dreaded such an eye as a voodoo. After I gained the old man's confidence, he told me that he belonged to an important secret society among the negroes which had had its origin and was connected with the escape of runaway slaves into the Dismal Swamp. The members of this society knew each other by a secret digital sign of extraordinary simplicity, which, out of regard for my kindness, he showed me. In a flash all this had passed through my mind, as I stared at the big negro boy by the camp fire with his cock eye. At a venture I gave him the sign, received a reply, and to our surprise he stooped down and grasped me by both legs in the attitude of a suppliant. He then motioned me to come aside and in a voice shaken with fear he asked how I came to be a member of the society. It turned out that Hampton, the old colored patient in Ward M, was his uncle and the whole family had this ocular peculiarity. I asked him where he lived. He said that his people were far in there, pointing towards the lake, and that he came out every week to work with the lock master.

Here was the very opportunity I sought. In few words I asked if he would not take us into the swamp in his dug-out. As he hesitated I gave him the sign and he at once said yes, but it must be at night. Tonight then I replied. "Be at the top of the lock at midnight." Too excited to sleep we sat by the fire, "amid a silence so *profound* it made the senses thrill." The ripple of the sluice alone broke the awful stillness.

At 12 we found Hampton with the canoe, in the bottom of which we sat, one in the middle and one at the bow, while Hampton with a strong paddle sat on a low moveable seat in the stern. It was one of those glorious nights at the full moon, the sheen of which was reflected along the entire length of the canal, and as we entered the lake the soft brilliancy of the light, just enough to show the low outlines in the distance, displayed in vivid weirdness the giant cypresses. In the launch we had stood away from the shore, as one must call it, but Hampton paddled at once towards the south margin, and went in and out among the cypresses like a skilful driver in a crowded street. I asked him if it were possible to paddle between the roots of one of the large trees, to which he replied in one word, "wait."

After skirting the south side of the lake for about two miles, Hampton headed the canoe directly for one of the largest trees we had seen, as if he meant to strike it. Turning suddenly to the left around a huge root, and as suddenly to the right, he passed into a wide channel made by eight roots to

3. Francis read this word as "sinplural" and surmised it was a "portmanteau word, compounded of *singular* and *plural* with more than a soupçon of *sin*?"

4. This obsolete phrase is often equated with the modern term gonorrhoea, but some historians have pointed out that it was applied to many different conditions.

our right and seven to the left, all wonderfully symmetrical and uniform, coalescing about six feet above the water.

Perfectly enchanted, I motioned Hampton to stop but he shook his head. I insisted and he slowed the canoe against one of the roots. At that moment we heard a splash in the water and a moccasin snake at least 4 feet long dropped from one of the roots into the water just missing the edge of the canoe. Hampton gave a start but in a flash I seized a paddle, shouted to Dr F. to steady the canoe and with the flat side had pinned the snake against one of the roots just at the water line.

Hampton yelled, "It is death to touch it, let me go on."

But seeing that I had the creature firmly caught close to the head so that it could not possibly strike, I grasped it by the neck and lifted it into the canoe. It was a perfect beauty and shone in the moonlight with a wonderful lustre. The second of my boyish dreams about the Dismal Swamp was more than fulfilled. I had not only seen but I had caught a moccasin. In a moment while Dr F. held a lighted match I made the snake harmless by extracting with my knife the fangs, and remembering a trick which Dr Kelly<sup>5</sup> had taught us, I looped it in the coluber knot which even a snake cannot untie, and laid it harmless and safe in the bottom of the canoe.

From under the cypress we emerged into a little bay of open water and heard a distinct ripple as of a brook running into the lake. In the thickest of the bushes, so that we had to duck our heads, we came upon a miniature rapid, up which with a strong effort Hampton forced the canoe, and we found ourselves in a stream the outlines of which were scarcely visible so thick were the trees above and about. Growing wider as we proceeded, we got once more into open spots in which the moonlight showed islands of moss supporting the spider-like roots of trees.

After paddling for at least two hours the trees seemed less tall, the islands larger and the proportion of land and water was reversed and we passed several large oases. On one of these Hampton stranded his canoe, gave a shrill whistle between his fingers, and then helped us out. A fine looking, half-naked negro with a lighted pine knot in one hand came out to greet us, in evident terror until Hampton shouted "all right". In a few minutes Hampton's mother joined the group and both were much excited to learn why he had come at such an hour. Speaking to them for a moment, he asked me to step forward, and as I did, gave the sign, at which they bowed and made signs of the greatest respect.

The house was a small two-roomed log structure, very comfortable, quite rain proof but devoid of ordinary furniture, neither bed nor bedding, table nor chairs. I was not interested in any of the externals, one thought alone absorbed me. Had these poor souls heard of Lincoln's proclamation or not? They had both been born in the swamp, how long ago they did not know. To the question to whom they belonged the man replied, "Massa Ransom", and fortunately added, "Old Aunt Letty", meaning his mother, would tell all about it.

In a few moments the woman came out — we had lighted a fire — leading a much bent old woman, evidently of great age, who was one of the last of the runaway slaves in the swamp. She and her husband had escaped years ago from the Ransom plantation in the Roanoke and, aided by the secret society, had reached the slave resort in the Dismal Swamp where they had bred and brought up a large family. As I had been at the Ransom's plantation and knew something of them, I cross questioned her and gathered that she must have escaped as far back as 1840 as she knew nothing of the Mexican War in which the Ransoms were engaged. Her mind was extraordinarily bright and she told some touching incidents in the life of the family of the truth of which I knew. Then I put the question did they know of the war? Yes they replied, Silas had told them of it and said he would like to be a soldier. Of the war of secession they had never heard as when I suggested that it would be better for Aunt Letty to return to the Ransoms, she said that she preferred a free life in the swamp and that she was no good nohow at her time of life.

The third of my dreams was realized — here were negroes in the Dismal Swamp which had not heard of the Lincoln Declaration. With trembling hand I took out my copy and by the light of the camp fire read the historical proclamation. When I came to the memorable words, "all men are born free and equal", Aunt Letty raised her seamed and sere face and with a chuckle said, "No sah, dat aint so, deres a heap of difference 'twixt my son Job and his boy Silas."

As it was four o'clock and Dr F. and I were starving, I asked Silas if he thought there was anything to eat in the house. He suggested that Aunt Letty would like nothing better than to cook the moccasin, which was considered a great delicacy in the swamp, but I was loth to give up my prize. Silas' mother came out in a few minutes with the shells of two terrapin, as I thought perhaps to give to us as a remembrance, but she raked the hot ashes from a corner of the fire, and as she put the shells into them I saw they were three fourths full. It was terrapin in the half shell! The real Dismal Swamp Diamond-Back, which feeds in the succulent roots of the mangroves<sup>6</sup> and therefrom gets a flavor far superior to the Chesapeake Bay variety. Smoking hot we — but I forgot I did not come here to describe the edible luxuries of the swamp. We left with but one regret that Dr F. had forgot his new moonlight Kodak. I would give a couple of hundred dollars for a good picture of the group which sat about that camp fire.

Five o'clock saw us started on our return journey. In the early dawn we entered the depth of the innermost recesses of the swamp. Once we passed through a long aisle of cypresses still shadowed in gloom. Down such a one the spirit guided Poe to the vault of his lost Ulalume.

We entered the lake by broad daylight and had a chance to see more clearly how completely hidden was this exit from one of the many cryptic districts of this wonderful place. The noise of the ripple might attract attention, but one could pass the spot a dozen times without suspicion.

5. The reference is to Howard Atwood Kelly; snakes were amongst his many interests.

6. Osler wrote "mangoves." The current editors have emended this to "mangroves", but Francis retained Osler's spelling and interpreted it as "perhaps a local hybrid of mangrove and the mango?"

One last incident, slight in itself but most satisfying, occurred as we neared the lake. In contrast to the stillness of the night, the morning chorus of frogs and newts and lizards and insects was almost deafening, and to my delight I saw scores of lively little red lizards, crawling in the branches above us. Just as we reached the little rapid brushing close to the low boughs, two of them fell in on F.'s hat. A trivial fact I say but necessary to complete the quartette of incidents with which from my boyhood days I had associated the Dismal Swamp.

#### TEXTUAL NOTE

This reading text of "The Dismal Swamp" is based on a new transcription of Osler's manuscript. Since the manuscript is incomplete, the editors have made many accidental emendations – changes in spelling, capitalization, paragraphing, and punctuation. So many, in fact, that we have not had room to list them here. The number of substantive emendations – the addition, omission, and rearrangement of words – was small, however, and we have recorded them below. These changes are of two kinds: 1) words Osler omitted, presumably because of the hasty composition and revision of the story; and 2) lacunae which he intentionally left, presumably hoping to return and fill, but never doing so. In the following list of substantive emendations, the left column contains the page, column (a or b), and line number of the emendation, the middle column, the emended readings, and the third column, the manuscript readings.

1.a1-2	[title]	[omitted]
2.a12	a	[omitted]
2.a12	eeriness	[unfilled lacuna]
2.a48	–	[unfilled lacuna]
2.b11	I gained	gaining
2.b12	to	[omitted]
2.b38	the	[omitted]
2.b51	which	[omitted]
2.b53	for one	for the one
2.b53	of	[omitted]
3.a18	not	[omitted]
4.a5	lizards, crawling	lizard the
4.a1c	[omitted]	... On our return to the lock we found 'Sir Michael' digging potatoes. No suspicion of our

## OSLER CLUB OF LONDON – COMMEMORATIVE VOLUME

The Osler Club of London proposes to publish a volume commemorating its 300th meeting. The volume as planned will contain the six papers on Osler presented at that meeting, Dr. William C. Gibson's Fitzpatrick Lecture of 1975 on *Three Canadian Pioneers – Banting, Bethune and Brock Chisholm*, a catalogue of the exhibit of Osleriana arranged for the 300th meeting, and four coloured plates of unusual interest. Those wishing to become subscribers or to obtain additional information should communicate with Dr. A.W. Franklin, 149 Harley Street, London, England, W1N 2DE.

## OSLER'S FAVOURITE BOOK

One of the many treasures of the Osler Library is a small volume which can properly be described as Sir William Osler's favourite book. It is the 1862 edition of the *Religio Medici* (*Bibl. Osl.* 4446). Osler once referred to it as "the most precious book in my library." A brief account of this volume has been published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 1975, 113: 657. A limited supply of reprints is available. Those wishing a reprint should send their requests to Dr. E.H. Bensley, Department of the History of Medicine, McGill University, 3655 Drummond Street, Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1Y6.

The nineteenth-century initial on the first page is from an Antique alphabet, Thistle Ornamental, designed by George Nesbitt and Company, New York.

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Legal Deposit 1/1976  
ISSN 0085-4557

Printed in Canada