

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

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THE EXAMINATION OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER'S BRAIN

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In addition to requesting a postmortem examination, Sir William Osler, in fulfillment of an undertaking made a quarter of century earlier, left instructions that his brain should be sent to the Wistar Institute and it was brought to Philadelphia by Dr. Thomas McCrae in 1920. In May, 1894, a few months before his first visit to Oxford, Osler went to Philadelphia to deliver the well known "Leaven of Science" address¹ at the opening of the Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology. During the celebration, he and some of his friends — William Pepper, Joseph Leidy and Francis Dercum amongst others — founded the Philadelphia Anthropological Society whose object was to bequeath their own brains to the Institute for study;² Osler had himself been interested in cerebral topography, and as a result of his own neuropathological studies, had called in question Moritz Benedek's contention that there were convolutional peculiarities in the brains of criminals.³

When Osler's brain arrived at the Wistar Institute, it was examined in great detail by Drs. Myrtle Canavan and Henry Donaldson using the elaborate topographical technique devised by Dr. Elmer Southard and extended by Dr. Canavan; this involved the measurement of selected sulci both in length and depth, over a fifth of the total cortex. The brain was compared with that of Dr. Granville Stanley Hall, a scholar in the field of psychology and education and Donaldson concluded "In the case of Sir William Osler the brain was heavy in relation to stature. The total extent of cortex was less than that of Hall even when the difference in brain size is considered, but both the frontal and occipital areas were well developed.... The brain of W.O. was well grown and therefore under favourable conditions for functional activity".⁴

In 1970 Professor Richard Walter wrote a "Historical note on Osler's Brain"⁵ in which he gave a precis of Dr. Donaldson's report but added that "apparently the brain was not sectioned and no microscopic study was performed" and that the brain remained in Philadelphia until 1963 "when the Osler Society of McGill Medical School requested the return of the brain to McGill for preservation with other Osler speci-

mens." It would seem that it was the late curator of the Wistar Institute who provided Professor Walter with this information, but subsequent enquiries have revealed some inaccuracies.

Early in 1959, Professor Penfield was asked to give an address at the Wistar Institute, for which he had little enthusiasm, as he was busy writing "The Torch," but the Director of the Institute revealed that they had Osler's brain and Penfield agreed to give a talk, if the brain could be examined at the Montreal Neurological Institute. When the brain arrived in Canada, it was noted that the tip of the left occipital lobe had been removed and the blood vessels and leptomeninges were already stripped, the cerebral hemispheres divided from each other and from the brainstem and the cerebellum detached from the pons.

The cerebrum was cut coronally and the brainstem and cerebellum horizontally. No focal lesion or abnormality was detected. Blocks were taken from the right frontal lobe, left insular cortex and basal ganglia, right hippocampus, pons, medulla and cerebellum. [The slides are numbered M 137 A-G and the gross photographs 59-1651/4; 59-2975/6]. The sections were reported on by Dr. G. Mathieson, Neuropathologist to the Montreal Neurological Institute, who concluded, "A survey of different regions has failed to show any significant histopathological changes. In particular there are no microabscesses such as are a common cerebral finding in patients with terminal pulmonary suppuration."

The brain was then returned to Philadelphia and the present Curator has confirmed that it is safely in the Wistar Institute store-room. There is no evidence that the Osler Society of McGill Medical School, which is an undergraduate medical society, ever had any dealings with Osler's brain (personal communication from Professors Penfield and Walter, Dr. Roosa of the Wistar Institute and Dr. G. Mathieson of the Montreal Neurological Institute).

REFERENCES

- 1 Osler W: "The Leaven of Science". *Univ. Med. Mag. Phila.* 6, 573-586. 1894. Reprinted in *Aequanimitas and other Addresses*. Philadelphia, Blakiston, 1904
- 2 Cushing H: *The Life of Sir William Osler*. Vol I, 196:396. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925
- 3 Osler W: "On the brains of criminals". With a description of the brains of two murderers. *Canad. Med. and Surg. J.* Montreal. 10:385-398, 1882
- "The Brains of Criminals". *Lancet* ii 38 1882

In 1974-75, Dr. A.H.T. Robb-Smith of Oxford published in the Medical History section of *Chest* an article entitled "Did Sir William Osler have carcinoma of the lung?" (Vol. 66, pp.712-716, December 1974 and Vol. 67, pp.82-87, January 1975). The manuscript which Robb-Smith submitted to *Chest* included an Appendix on "The examination of Sir William Osler's brain." The main body of the manuscript, which concerned the rumour that Osler was a heavy smoker and died from carcinoma of the lung, was accepted and duly published but the editor of *Chest* declined to publish Robb-Smith's appendix on Osler's brain, presumably because it seemed irrelevant to the main topic of the paper. However, he did consent to publish the appendix in the reprints supplied to the author. Inquiries received by the Osler Library suggest that this rather unusual arrangement has led to confusion amongst those seeking information about the literature on the post-mortem examination of Osler's brain. The confusion has perhaps been increased by Earl F. Nation's "Up-dated checklist of Osleriana" (1985) which contains a reference to Robb-Smith's article in *Chest* (item 151). This reference includes a brief mention of Robb-Smith's "addendum" on Osler's brain but those who turn to the journal *Chest* will find no such addendum.

To resolve this confusion, his appendix on Osler's brain is here reproduced.

"Report on the brains of Richards and O'Rourke". *Canad. Med. and Surg. J.* Montreal, 11:161-166, 1883

4 Donaldson HH: "Brains of three scholars". *J. Comp. Neurol.* 46:1-95, 1928

5 Walter RD: "Osler's brain". *Bull. Los Angeles Neurol. Soc.* 39:107-110, 1970

OSLER REVISITED OXFORD, ENGLAND: AUGUST 27 TO SEPTEMBER 3, 1989

Dr. Nicholas Dewey has previously conducted at Oxford a medical-historical conference entitled "Osler Revisited" (*Osler Library Newsletter*, No.45, February 1984). This was highly successful and Dr. Dewey plans to conduct a second "Osler Revisited" in August-September of this year. Those who wish detailed information should communicate directly with Dr. Nicholas Dewey, Medical History Conferences, P.O. Box 3104, St. Augustine, Florida 32085, U.S.A.

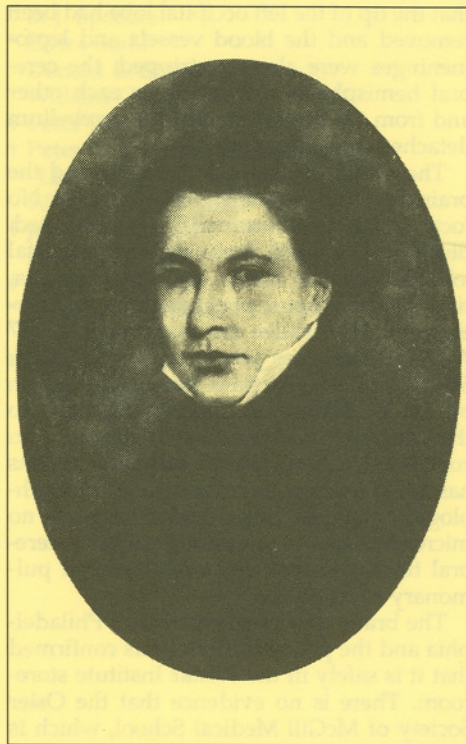
THE MANUSCRIPT DIARIES OF FEATHERSTONE LAKE OSLER

"I must send you a copy of my father's journals & papers which my brother E.B. has had printed here. You will be interested to look it over. It is a private, family affair. R.B. will see in it a good bit of our Clarendon Press work."¹ So wrote Sir William Osler to Mrs. Robert Brewster in September 1915, shortly after his return from a visit to No.3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill) in France. The volume which his brother Edmund Boyd Osler had just seen through the press was *Records of the Lives of Ellen Free Pickton and Featherstone Lake Osler*, an anthology of autobiographical memoirs and letters from the pens of Sir William's parents together with two journals kept by Featherstone Lake Osler during the years 1828-1830 and 1837-1839. With characteristic modesty, Sir William did not mention that he was co-editor of the volume, a fact recorded by W.W. Francis in a manuscript note on one of the preliminary pages of the Osler Library's copy. The page on which this manuscript note appears contains the following printed notice: "These papers are privately printed for the members of the family. The journals are in possession of the Hon. Featherstone Osler of Toronto. The letters of Featherstone and Ellen Osler, with other family papers, have been collected and bound in five volumes, an index to which has been printed and distributed to their children and grandchildren." Francis' handwritten annotation, dated 1949, identifies the two editors and notes that "The '5 vols.' are now in the library of Trinity College, (University of) Toronto." Below this, in pencil, Francis began a sentence he never completed: "The 'journals'..." Whether he was simply distracted in the midst of writing, or whether he never found out where the original journals of Featherstone Lake Osler were located, cannot be ascertained. Thus the whereabouts of the journals was unknown to the Osler Library until a few months ago, when Mrs. Eve Osler Hampson, the granddaughter of Sir Williams' brother, the Hon. Featherstone Osler, presented us with the manuscript volumes. They had come into her possession through her father, Mr. Philip Osler, who apparently had received them from his father.

Strictly speaking, these journals are not Featherstone Osler's original diary notes, maintained day by day, but rather are fair copies, transcribed by the author some time after the events described. The first journal of 1828-30 was apparently begun as a private record, but later copied out, with some editing, for Featherstone Osler's family and friends. It describes his adventures as a naval officer aboard H.M.S. *Tribune* and H.M.S. *Algerine* on a cruise down the eastern coast of South America as far south as the Falkland Islands, and then around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean. Episodes of weathering storms and pursuing Brazilian privateers alternate with striking descriptions of landscapes and astute, occa-

sionally witty comments on colonial society, both Spanish and British. Sir William's father emerges from these pages as a tolerant and easy-going man, with a marked taste for travel and adventure and a most pronounced interest in the attributes, collective and individual, of the ladies — "females" as he calls them — which he encounters. His musings on the charms of the señoritas of Montevideo or Buenos Aires are tempered, however, by a certain anxiety about the prospect of matrimony, though by no means so severe as to spoil his pleasure: "though not a marrying man, I am strangely taken up with these seducers of mankind, and when ashore, never feel so happy as when in their society. I cannot for the life of me account for it, but so it is."

Seven years later, an ordained minister of the Church of England and, misgivings notwithstanding, a married man, Featherstone Osler began a second diary to record his journey to Canada and the beginnings of his work there. Once again, the manuscript in our possession is a fair copy, for this diary



Featherstone Lake Osler, from a portrait taken in about his eighteenth year (born 1805)

was maintained for the purpose of reporting to the body which sponsored his emigration, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. A copy of a letter from Bishop Strachan of Toronto to the Society, dated 30 April 1840 and inserted in the manuscript diary, commends Osler's work in the diocese, and adds "But his journals are doubtless before the Society, from which many incidents might be selected of a most encouraging nature, and shewing how much more might yet be done were we able to send additional laborers." One wonders, indeed, whether prospective missionaries in England would

have found Featherstone Osler's accounts of bad roads, mosquitoes, lukewarm congregations and typically Canadian weather to be "of a most encouraging nature". Yet his tales of warm welcome by Anglicans who had not seen a priest in many years, or of camping in a swamp overnight amidst howling wolves, might have stirred an idealistic or adventurous spirit. The second journal is the self-portrait of an energetic and conscientious clergyman, tender-hearted and self-sacrificing if not notably spiritual, and given no longer to graphic reveries about "the females"!

The Library is deeply grateful to Mr. Osler and Mrs. Hampson for depositing these unique family records with us. They are direct witnesses to the spring from which Sir William Osler drew both his capacity for hard work, and his flexibility and spirit of adventure.

Faith Wallis

1. Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925): 2. 1175.

R. VANCE WARD (1899 – 1989)

R. Vance Ward, who died on February 18th of this year, occupied a special role in the history of the Osler Society of McGill University. This Society was founded by a group of medical students and the first regular meeting with presentation of papers was held on October 19th, 1921, several years before the Osler Library came to McGill. One of the papers read at that meeting was entitled "The Literary Works of Sir William Osler" by R. Vance Ward, then a third year McGill medical student. The manuscript of his paper has been preserved in the Osler Society archives and was published, for the first time, in the *Osler Library Newsletter*, No. 24, February 1977.

Dr. Ward, who received his medical degree from McGill in 1924, had a rewarding career. In addition to being a long-time member of the McGill Medical Faculty and the Montreal General Hospital, he was, at various times, Chief Medical Officer of the Montreal Life Insurance Company and President of both the Quebec College of Physicians and Surgeons and the Quebec Division of the Canadian Medical Association.

E. H. Bensley

Note: Some copies of the *Osler Library Newsletter* containing R. Vance Ward's paper (No. 24, February 1977) are still available. Those who wish a copy should write the Editor of the *Newsletter* at 3655 Drummond St., Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1Y6.

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The names of Friends whose contributions are received after January 31, 1989 will be listed in the June issue of the *Newsletter*.

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