Genl Francis A Winter

CU5417/51.5

Some Recollections of Sir William Osler, during the War.

It was my good fortune to be detailed in May of 1918 as Chief Surgeon of Base Section No. 3, of the American Expeditionary Forces. The duties of this position involved among other things, the establishment and maintenance of hospitals for American troops in England, and we provided hospitalization amounting to about 9,000 beds, prior to October, 1918, at which time, my connection with the activities was suspended. During this period, I saw Sir William Osler quite frequently, and it was always my outstanding impression that I must marvel at the energy, activity, and interest, which he showed at his time of life, and under the stress of his enormous work in England, in everything which in any way related to the medical care of American soldiers. These faculties seemed to have a particular application to military medicine, which, of course, was at that time, both in England and France, the outstanding line of the endeavor of all medical men. It is needless to say that his consultation work with the British Army and public was very great, but it was very evident that he placed so thoroughly at the front any call which came to him, whereby he might be put into touch with the activities of the American Medical Department.

As I apprehend his bent at the time, there was no circumstance connected with the medical welfare of our troops, which did not get from him a precedence in his daily work, and which resulted in his being always present at any function which connoted the effort to better the state of our men hospitalized in England. I never gave him an invitation to go to one of our hospitals, which were widely scattered, that he did not eagerly take it, to the great delight of everybody who was fortunate enough to be the beneficiary of the visit. He

frequently came with his very charming Lady. I recall very well a day we spent going by motor to Dartford, about twenty miles from London, where the King's County (Brooklyn) Base Hospital Unit No. 37 (Lieut. Col. Edward Fiske) maintained a large hospital of 2500 beds. The day was delightful from the point of the natural setting, and the sunshine in the hospital was made the more acceptable by the delightful presence of the great medical man, as he walked through the wards, cheering the patients by the charm of his cordial and jovial wit, which he dropped so spontaneously. Soldiers' comments on his visit, had he known them, would have justified so vastly his effort in having come.

It was characteristic of him that immediately upon going into one of these hospitals, he would take the Commanding Officer by the button-hole, and with an assumed censorious air, say to him: "Show me your laboratory! If you haven't a good laboratory, you have a bad hospital, but I am sure you are too energetic an American doctor not to have a good laboratory". Then he would begin the propounding of questions as to the pathological study carried on in the hospital, and if there were deficiencies in the laboratory section, it is needless to say that this attitude of mind on his part, got an immediate reflection into the mind of the man who was running the institution, and the laboratory followed in the march of things.

As I have said, the untiring and ever-ready quality in Sir William was to me remarkable, but not more so than the astounding range of his knowledge of medicine, and of surgery too, as revealed in conversations with him. I am sure I talked to him on no subject in any way relating to the medical sciences, that I did not at once get an inspiring response.

I recall very well another delightful visit, which he made to Winchester

to contribute a bit to a Medical Officers Clinical Society, which Major W. Jason Mixter of Boston had established among the officers at the large camp at that place. In the face of the worst kind of weather and surroundings by no means conducive to the comfort, that three score and ten usually seeks for itself, he went to this meeting at Winchester, and led a delightful symposium on medicine as found in Camps. Weather, or any other adverse influences did not in the most remote degree lessen his enthusiasm.

When we opened up our large hospital at Portsmouth, which was in charge of the Albany Base Hospital Unit No. 33, commanded by Captain (afterwards Lieut. Colonel) Erastus Corning, Sir William went to the inaugural exercises, raised the American flag over the institution, and made an address which was calculated to instill and foster a perfectly indomitable pride in every man who belonged to the Unit.

I mention these several things as illustrations of the practical output, which represented the workings of his spirit, when it met opportunities to exalt and benefit his beloved profession. It must be remembered that all during this period, he carried with him the awful blight and sorrow, which comes to the man of his age, who had lost irretrievably the hope of his life, represented by the splendid son, who had been killed on the field of battle in France. I remember one day when we were driving together, he turned and said to me: "Man's greatest pleasures in this world are of such uncertain tenure, and the moment wipes out the joy of the past, and the hope of the future". I said, 'I understand, Sir William, what you mean'. He nodded, and looked out of the window of the motor, in which we were driving.

It is touching to recall a pathetic reference he made to me one day affecting his age. "Ah, 'he said,' if I were but a young man, so that I might

take up under modern conditions of knowledge and study, such a subject as neurological surgery. Think of the grandeur of such work, when a fellow works up his case, does his surgery and is master of the entire field! How I wish I could start in, under the present state of specialized knowledge, and do work like that".

More I think, than any man I ever knew, Sir William seemed to me, to realize the idea of a delightful living book. The alternations of deep wisdom, with airy persiflage and subtle humor, brought to my mind several times the notion, that I was enjoying a living Addison, or Doctor Holmes. The transitions and shadings of the "Spectator", and the "Autocrat" are no more diverting and charming than those same contrasts, which one met in Sir William, and to the profound comment on blood pathology, there would succeed so easily, the delightful and mirthful story of himself or others. The scintillation was like sunshine on the wave crests of an ocean of thought. I doubt if any man ever shone with more charm than he at a dinner table, and the recollection of several occasions at the Athaeneum (evidently his special club) and at other places in London, is a heritage to those of us who were privileged to be present.

His home at Oxford was much of a Mecca to medical officers in England and all the graces were to be found there.

It was sometimes surprising to me to see his manifestations of interest for individual medical officers, notably those who had been his old students. I had a number of letters from him, from time to time, telling me that Brown was a good chap in a laboratory, or that Robinson was a first class clinician. These certifications were most helpful to me.

Surely, this gentle, forceful, inspiring man was ever on the quest of

anything that might benefit and exalt medicine, and I hope he was as happy in the doing of the kindly and helpful act, as he made those who were the beneficiaries of his soulful touch.

Francis A. Winter