Finding Osler's Letters in the Osler Library: A Preliminary Report and Some Discoveries

Finding Osler's Letters in the Osler Library: A Preliminary Report and Some Discoveries by Dr. Faith Wallis, History of Medicine Librarian, and Mr. Blake Gopnik, a history student at McGill University, who, over the past two summers, has been working on the Osler Letters Inventory Project. Mr. Gopnik's work on this project was made possible by a grant from the Canadian government's 'Challenge' programme for student summer employment.

The lead article of this issue of the Newsletter is by Dr. Faith Wallis, History of Medicine Librarian, and Mr. Blake Gopnik, a history student at McGill University who, over the past two summers, has been working on the Osler Letters Inventory Project. Mr. Gopnik's work on this project was made possible by a grant from the Canadian government's 'Challenge' programme for student summer employment.

The initial letter on this page is from The Handbook of Mediaeval Alphabets and Devices by Henry Shaw and is reproduced from Alexander Nesbitt (ed.), Decorative Alphabets and Initials (New York: Dover, 1989).
Many of the letters addressed to Osler probably finished up in his waste-paper basket, for he had a reputation for casually tossing out papers that were no longer of immediate import, with little concern for posterity. This contrasts sharply with the devotion with which the recipients of his postcards and notes guarded his writings. Many of his correspondents, or their heirs and families, have presented us with letters from his hand. These can take the form of a fairly extensive series of correspondence (such as the group of letters from Osler to George Dock recently donated to the Library by Dr Edgar Mauer of Los Angeles), or a single card. Occasionally the letters have been gathered into elegantly bound scrapbooks, like Aubrey T. Mussen's album of Cherished Letters from Sir William Osler. Moreover, Osler's letters, in varying numbers, may be found embedded in the personal papers of other individuals (e.g. Maude Abbott or Edward Archibald) housed in the Library. A very special case is presented by the Cushing papers, and in particular by the research files assembled for The Life of Sir William Osler. The organization of these files mirrors the strict chronological arrangement of the biography, and hence the handwritten notes and extracts from printed sources, a considerable number of letters. Most of these are typed transcriptions prepared by Cushing's secretary from the originals loaned by Lady Osler or others. Cushing worked from these transcriptions, and the excisions he performed to abbreviate the letter for quotation are marked in his neat, diminutive handwriting and jet-black ink. However, the papers also contain original correspondence which family and acquaintances gave to Cushing. These include, for example, holograph letters from Father W. A. Johnson, Osler's revered teacher at Trinity College School, to William James, whose copies of James' Pragmatism (Bibl. Osl. 3074), and Some Problems of Philosophy (Bibl. Osl. 3075) which refer to the novelist's "melancholia." Osler's intervention in James' case has been discussed, however, in some recent biographies of James, notably in Leon Edel's encyclopedic account. Henry James fell ill early in 1909, apparently of heart trouble. He appealed for help to his brother William, who wrote to Osler; Osler arranged a referral to Sir James Mackenzie, a renowned cardiac specialist of the day. By January 1910, however, Henry James' condition had seriously deteriorated. He suffered from gout and anorexia, the latter apparently due in part to his obsession with "Fletcherism," or excessive fastidiousness of his food. It was very plain that his trouble was not simply organic, and his friends became very concerned.

One of the people closest to James was Edith Wharton, then living in Paris. Knowing James' financial difficulties - his latest literary ventures had not been successful, and this probably contributed to his depression - she made him a discreet offer of financial aid to offset medical expenses. James gently refused, but promised to contact her if he was in grave need. In March of 1910, Osler was contacted by Harry James, William's son and Henry's nephew, who was living with his uncle at the time. On the 14th of that month Osler examined Henry James in person in London. The diagnosis was nervous breakdown, and Osler's prescription massage and exercise. The quality of the relationship between Henry James and Edith Wharton, one of the most intriguing literary friendships of modern times, is nowhere more clearly manifested that in Wharton's solicitude for James during his breakdown. She was in constant communication with James, sending flowers and letters almost every day, and even coming from France on several visits. She came down to Rye herself, and was photographed at the door of her hotel, the Lamb House, residence in Rye, Sussex, in March 1910 with complete uniformity, I should have written, who described her as "a thorough and charming examination in London by Sir William Osler." Her offer of funds has been noted, but what has hitherto escaped the notice of critics who have studied the Wharton-James friendship is that Edith Wharton took the initiative of contacting Sir William Osler herself and soliciting his involvement in James' case. It is not known whether Osler and Edith Wharton ever met, but Osler certainly knew and appreciated the novelist's work before the events of 1910 brought them into correspondence. Osler owned a copy of Wharton's 1898 novel on euthanasia, The Fruit of the Tree (Bibl. Osl. 5578A); apparently he purchased this book on his own, from Boyle's in London. The second of the two Wharton books in the Bibliotheca is no. 617, Artemis to Action and Other Verse (New York: Scribner's, 1909); this is a presentation copy from Wharton to Osler, dated, significantly, March 1910. Osler included this book in the Bibliotheca for the sake of one of its poems, "Vesalius in Zante," a work with which, as we shall see, he was already familiar. Glued to the back fly-leaves are two letters from Wharton to Osler, which we transcribe here.

March 7th, 1910, Paris

Dear Professor Osler,

My friend Mr Henry James is very ill, and he promised me some weeks ago that if his illness was prolonged, and if in any material way I could be of service to him, he would let me know when the moment arrived.

I have just had a letter from his nephew Henry James Jr, who tells me that Mr. James has just had another bad relapse, and that they are now hoping, rather against hope, to build him up sufficiently to get him up to London to see you. Mr. James himself wrote me last week that he had a great wish to see you, and I wrote back at once, begging him to ask you to come down to Rye as soon as you could do so. In reply to this letter of mine, young Harry James has just written, telling me of his uncle's last relapse, and of their hope to get him up to London - explaining that it would not do to ask you to come down to him because "it would be pretty formidable to Uncle Henry, who would be bothered by a sense of hospitable responsibilities which he couldn't discharge."

Mr. James and I are old friends, & have talked together about his financial situation, and I think the 'bother' of having you come to Rye may be complicated for him by the fear of the expense.

Therefore it seems to me that the moment has come when I may act upon his promise to let me be of service to him, and relieve him of the material 'bother' connected with your visit. It seems to me - as far as I can judge at this distance - that it would be of infinite advantage to him to see you as soon as possible, and without the preliminary risk and fatigue of the journey to London; & so I write to ask if you can arrange to go down either to Ashford or to Folkestone on the pretext of a consultation, and then run over to Rye, letting Mr. James think that you had taken him in, as it were, incidentally.

I have written Harry James that I intended to propose this to you, and that I wish to bear the expense of your visit to Mr James. I have enjoined him not to tell his uncle anything of the proposed arrangement, but simply (should you consent) to let him learn from you that, on a given day, you will be in his neighbourhood, and will come over to see him.

I have ventured to act rather authoritative-ly, as you see, because Mr. James has no one...
near him but his young nephew, who might naturally hesitate to take the initiative in such a case - & because I feel from Mr. James's letters to me, that he is profoundly discouraged, and needs to have, as soon as possible, the mental stimulus which a visit from you would give him.

Believe me, dear Professor Osler,
Sincerely yours,
Edith Wharton.

[PS.] Harry James has probably told you how worried his uncle is at the thought of having to put off his play at the Repertory Theatre. This troubles him more than anything.13

What Osler replied to Edith Wharton is not known, but its tenor may be inferred from her answer of March 11, also included in the Library's copy of Articules to Action.

March 11 [1910]

Dear Dr. Osler,

It is kind of you to write me as you have, for I sent my letter with some embarrassment, which I overcame only because no obstacle counts as against my wish to be of some use to Mr. James.

I am glad indeed to hear that it is possible to move him to London, & that the move may have been made already; and I needn't say how grateful I should be if you could spare the time to let me know the result of your visit.

Your allusion to Vesalius gave me great pleasure, for it was a proud moment of my life when the Librarian of Johns Hopkins wrote me, last year, that you had instructed me to unearth a copy of my verses for the library!

They have now been put into a little volume, which I am sending you only because it contains that poem, & not with the base design of making you read the rest! -

Please don't take the trouble to acknowledge this small offering - and accept my thanks for the address on Servetus of which you announce the approach.

I am probably going to London on March 17th for a few days - chiefly to see Mr. James - & it would be a great pleasure if I could see you too.

Sincerely yours
Edith Wharton.

Notes

2. ibid., p. 400.
3. ibid., p. 487.
4. ibid., pp. 392-3, 1181.
5. ibid., pp. 727, 800, 816.
9. ibid., pp. 292-293.
12. This involvement is not noted in any of the biographies of Wharton or James, nor does it figure in Millicent Bell's Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship. (New York: George Braziller, 1965).
13. The play in question was The Outcry, and the difficulties of casting and producing it culminated in May 1912, when the death of King Edward VII closed the theatres for the period of mourning and funeral, and dealt a death blow to Charles Frohman's imperilled repertory company; see Edel, op. cit., 385-6, 440, 446.
14. Michael Servetus was published in book form in London and Baltimore in 1909; however, as it was still early in 1910, it is possible that the bound copies were not yet available in bookstores.
gall’s interests in cardiology, medical history and teaching, but also introduced him to the writings of Sir William Osler; it was from Dr. Abbott that he received the book that was to transform him into a confirmed Oslerian, Aequanimitas and Other Addresses. Following postgraduate study in the United States and Europe, Dr. Segall returned to Montreal in 1926 to join the staff of the Montreal General Hospital and of the Faculty of Medicine at McGill. He also joined the fledgling Osler Society at McGill; he has remained ever after a loyal supporter of this group, and has twice been elected Honorary President. When Osler’s library arrived at McGill in 1929, Dr. Segall lost no time in seeking out Dr. W. W. Francis, and in cementing a relationship which has endured and deepened to the present day.

Meanwhile, Harold Segall was building a reputation as the busiest and most innovative cardiologist in Montreal. Over his 55 years of active practice, he pioneered many important medical enterprises. Four cardiology clinics owe their foundation to him, as does the Montreal Cardiac Society, from which emerged the Canadian Cardiovascular Society and the Canadian Heart Foundation. Dr. Segall brought the first ECG machine to Montreal, and developed an important system for the notation of heart sounds. Amidst all these activities, he yet found time not only to support the Osler Library, but to make use of it for his own medical-historical researches. These have mainly concentrated on cardiology. His study of the Russian surgeon N. C. Korotkoff, who first described a method for taking blood pressure readings using an inflatable cuff, have attracted much attention, and he is working at present on a history of cardiology in Canada.

When, at that fateful farewell address in Baltimore in 1905, William Osler invoked the notion of the “fixed period” and argued in favour of chloroforming “useless” scientists who had passed their fortieth year, he was, of course, speaking in jest, although the sensationalist press took him in earnest. As all of us who work at the Osler Library know, Dr. Segall’s energy and enthusiasm at the age of 90 are living proof that Osler’s joke was pure satire. It is typical of Harold Segall that he gave his friends a present on his own birthday: a specially printed copy of an address to his friends and family should, instead of personal birthday gifts, offer a donation to the Osler Library, and a list of those who contributed follows. Our gratitude for Dr. Segall’s continued presence amongst us is very deep. Taking our cue from his own “Opinions on Longevity” that “no healthy life can be too long”, we wish him health in abundance, that he may be with us much, much longer.

Donations to the Osler Library in Honour of Dr. Segall’s 90th Birthday:

Franklin Arbuckle
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Beverly Baserman
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A. Zeiber
A Visit To The Open Arms

When, as a McGill medical student, I received final word that my one-month elective in medical ethics at Green College, Oxford had been confirmed for the summer of 1987, I was delighted. Not only would this afford me the opportunity to experience the university and city life at Oxford but, even more thrilling as president-elect of the McGill Student Osler Society, the opportunity to experience the environment in which Sir William Osler spent the last of his years.

Armed with a note of introduction provided by Dr. William Feindel and a prearranged meeting through the kind efforts of Dr. Edward Bensley, I was bound to make Osler connections as I met the Warden of Green College, Sir John Walton. I made the acquaintance of Sir John on a sunny July morning and, following a brief tour of Green College, we made the pleasant five minute stroll over to 13 Norham Gardens, the Open Arms.

As we rounded the slight eastward bend in the two-way street, the beauty and majesty of 13 Norham Gardens suddenly erupted out of the lush green foliage on the right side. For a moment I had transcended time and could see vividly in my imagination Sir William come bounding down the front steps, welcoming the new student to Oxford and the Open Arms.

Inside, my tour was limited to the main floor, the other rooms being rented out. The high ceilings, paintings, woodwork, fireplace, and spiral staircase all contributed to the Oxford atmosphere. Out on the back terrace, reclining in the original furniture, it did not take much of a prodding for me to again think of the days when the Oslers and guests dominated that very place.

The disappointment of 13 Norham Gardens coming down the front steps, welcoming the new student to Oxford and the Open Arms.

The disappointed of 13 Norham Gardens suddenly erupted out of the lush green foliage on the right side. For a moment I had transcended time and could see vividly in my imagination Sir William Osler bequeathed to McGill University and which forms the nucleus of the Osler Library of the History of Medicine. The catalogue, following Osler’s own scheme of classification and enriched with his annotations, was completed in the decade following his death by W.W. Francis, R.H. Hill and Archibald MacAlloch. By 1969 the Bibliotheca was long out of print and a new reprint was published by the McGill-Queen’s University Press. This was provided with a new prologue, by Lloyd G. Stevenson, and addenda and corrigenda. The 1969 Bibliotheca has been out of print for several years, and in view of this, the Osler Library has arranged for the reprinting of 200 copies of the 1969 edition. The reprint is attractively bound with Osler’s coat of arms embossed on the cover; it employs permanent, acid-free paper, which has the additional advantage of being thinner, so the volume is easier to handle. Copies are available from the Osler Library for $140 (Canadian) or $110 (U.S.); Friends of the Osler Library may purchase the volume for $125 (Canadian) or $95 (U.S.).

Frances Groen Honoured

McGill’s Life Sciences Area Librarian Frances Groen has been elected President of the Medical Library Association which has more than 5000 members in 70 countries and is based in Chicago. Amongst Mrs. Groen’s predecessors as President is Dr. W.W. Francis, our first Osler Librarian.

Willie: A Dream Now on Videotape

Newsletters of 1983-84 (nos. 43, 46, 47) contain references to Willie: A Dream, a dramatic monologue portraying Sir William Osler written and performed by Dr. Joseph LelIa, Chairman of the Department of Humanities and Social Studies in Medicine of McGill University. The first performance was held in the Osler Library on May 11, 1983. Described as a “socio-historical-psychological interpretation”, this innovative portrayal of Osler proved highly popular, and Dr. LelIa was invited to perform elsewhere at McGill University and in other centres in Canada and the United States. The monologue, polished by repeated performances, has now been recast as a videotape (in preparation for which Dr. LelIa grew an Oslerian moustache and shaved the front part of his scalp!) The director, Carlos Ferrand, made extensive use of the architecture, photograph collections and books of the Osler Library to evoke an intriguing and perhaps controversial portrait of “Willie”. The videotape is available on loan from the Osler Library. Readers wishing to purchase copies should contact Dr. LelIa at his new address, Academic Dean, King’s College, 266 Epworth Avenue, London, Ontario, N6A 2M3.

Reprint of Osler’s Men and Books

Dr. Earl Nation collected twenty-six short pieces written by William Osler for the “Men and Books” section of the Canadian Medical Association Journal and in 1959, with the permission of the Editor of the Journal, published them in an elegant volume printed at the Castle Press. The book has long been out of print and difficult to find. Now, under the imprint of the Sacrum Press of Durham, North Carolina, Professor G.S.T. Cavanagh of the Duke University Medical Center Library has published an equally elegant and very welcome reprint. The original edition was dedicated to the memory of George Dock. This new edition is dedicated “by the editor to the memory of George Dock and the publisher to the memory of William Willoughby Francis”. Copies can be obtained from Old Galen’s Books, Box 3044, Durham, North Carolina 27705.
The Library gratefully acknowledges the support it has received from Friends, both old and new, who have responded to the appeal for funds for the 1987-88 academic year. To date 275 Friends have given a total of approximately $11,500.00. Most of the contributions have come from Friends in Canada and the United States of America. However, very welcome contributions have come also from Australia, Belgium, England, Switzerland, West Germany, and the West Indies.

The names of Friends whose contributions are received after January 31, 1988 will be listed in the June issue of the Newsletter.


Friends of the Osler Library

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