William Osler and Marjorie

ight of my later Life - adorable superba. Absent from thee my heart languishes and I feel so desolated that neither my work nor my play has any joy in it. With you and in your presence the smallest trifles of life are full of abiding happiness. That day you remember when M. began to make love to me in a most improper manner.

What could I not do under the greater exigencies of life if only your guiding hand was always near. Your devoted Egerton.

That was Osler’s tongue-in-cheek letter of 1905 to a young woman. Osler represented the same lady in two of his dreams, as related by Charles Roland. A dream probably experienced in 1911 was recorded by William as follows: “... I have had extraordinary dreams the past month but singularly unsuccessful in remembering. Some of shocking improbability yet I was not the least surprised. M.’s husband was her father P.H. who was just going off on a trip. He had the same relation to me as of old. We saw him in the cab and went back to the house, when M. began to make love to me in a most improper manner.”

Who was this “M” who played a part in Osler’s dreams and correspondence? Well – she was my mother, as many of the readers of this article may already have guessed.

Gwendolyn Marjorie Howard was born in Montreal in 1882 to Robert Palmer Howard, and was his Professor at McGill. Marjorie’s parents had both died by the time she was ten; thereafter she lived a peripatetic, cosmopolitan life, with Montreal as a base. Her contacts were broadened by her half-brother Jared Howard’s marriage to the daughter of a Canadian millionaire, Lord Strathcona.

Marjorie’s travels saw her frequently at the Osler’s house, in Baltimore until 1905 and Oxford thereafter. Osler felt some responsibility to the orphaned children of his respected teacher. His attachment to Marjorie’s brother Campbell was related in Palmer Howard’s The Chief. Marjorie’s good looks and personality made her a welcome visitor, as she played her part in the entertainment of the many young people who frequented the Oslers’ “Open Arms.”

Ninety-four letters from William Osler were found in Marjorie’s possessions at her death. They were dated from 1904 to 1919. With them was a note stating: “Letters from Doccie O. I only found these after Cushing’s Life was published.” The letters were devoted entirely to family matters. Palmer Howard’s dating of the letters when he was preparing The Chief greatly facilitated this commentary. In excerpting them, I illustrate Osler’s enjoyment of younger people – in this case a woman 33 years his junior.

A letter of 1905 from Oxford was addressed to “Dear D.” (for Darling) and refers to Strathcona’s Scottish west coast island of Colonsay and the children of Marjorie’s half-brother Jared Howard. A fuller version of Dr. Futcher’s account of Marjorie’s engagement to “Vic” was soon broken and William wrote “Dearest Missus” from New York:

“... Please do not get into the Halifax habit – I am sure the climate is not good for you and after you have seen Vic and had (1) one sinistral, (2) two dextral, and (3) ambidextral hugs, hurry to Northam Gardens... Yours Reggie

Marjorie’s engagement to “Vic” was soon broken and William wrote “Dearest Missus” from New York:

“... What a good time you’ve had in Berlin – did I not tell you so? Please be careful of Munsterberg – twould never do. What a desolation you are! ... We have not seen any of the boys – but on Sunday they will be at the New House – the Open Arms or the Always Inn.

And two weeks later Osler counselled “Dearest M.” further regarding the suitor Munsterberg:

“... Do not, I implore you! succumb to von M’s pertinacity! But perhaps he is very nice! I do not like German husbands for English or American girls. What a desolation you are. Do hurry home – all the boys are longing to see you. Good old Manger is so sweet. I really

Originally presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the American Osler Society on May 8 of this year in Baltimore. A fuller version of Dr. Futcher’s account of Osler and Marjorie is scheduled to appear in the winter edition of the Transactions and Studies of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

The initial letter on this page is reproduced from Alexander Nesbitt (ed.) Decorative alphabets and initials, plate 118, Dover Publications, 1959.
with twins ... What is most ominous is the
twist tail of this new comet. [Halley's] So lay
in a double supply of baby-linen ... Your
loving Dad.

In March, 1910, "My dearest Little Mis-
sus" was informed:

Here are two of the earliest from your pansy
bed - one for Isaphaena the other for Thomas
Palmer Howard - Place one on the right side,
the other on the left attached with pink ribbon
for the boy, blue for the girl and it will soothe
them. By this time they must be friendly little
souls.... Your loving Dad.

On September 14, 1910, a day after I was
born, Osler wrote to "Dearest Marjorie":

It was a great delight to have the cable. We
began to fear lest there had been a mistake and
that it was all fat. DO be careful now - do not
let the modern Doctor get you up too soon ... 
I am afraid you will have to adopt a puppy to
keep the "White Mountains" as Revere calls
them from bursting. Your loving Dad.

"Darling Lactea" was
addressed in October,
1910:

We just talk of you and
Palmer all the time and I
very nearly take the
steamer every Saturday.
Your letters are splendid
and we love to hear details
- weight, girls, pinkness
of the toes, color of eyes,
teeth - hair, is it black and
has he much - is it (hair)
rubbing off already ... Are
there beads on his ribs?
TBF will be watching for
all these things. I do hope
he pukes easily - 'tis such
a good sign. Your loving
Dad.

And Osler through
1919 continued warmly
about Marjorie's expand-
ing nursery, transmitting
invitations to visit Oxford.
Here are two of Osler's
many admonitions that
the newly wedded Futch-
ers save money. Thus to
Marjorie in January, 1910:

Now read Tom Futcher
this part - (1) Has he his
life insurance? Just do it
this week. (2) Like good
children begin to save
money this year - well
within your income from
the start. Remember the
character I gave you - as a good business
woman and you are.

And in November, 1910:

Have you saved any money yet for the baby -
Do be careful children - now in the days of
your prosperity. We are going to buy a
farm for Isaac [Revere] - he will never do
anything at books.

Sadness finally came to both the Osler
and Futcher families. After Revere Osler
died of wounds on August 29, 1917, William
wrote "Dearest Marjorie" on August 31:

The dear Laddie has gone and we are left heart-
broken ... We knew it would come ...
In turn my brother Bruce Futcher age 7, died of influenza in November, 1918. Thomas had just returned from a year with a Canadian Army Hospital in Britain. Osler wrote “Dearest Marjorie and Tom” immediately:

Our hearts are just aching for you ... What a calamity to have to part with the dear boy! ... How fortunate Tom was home ... Poor dears - 'tis a wound that never can heal! ... How I wish we were with you. Ah me! these are sad days - no peace in our hearts. [The Armistice had just been declared.] With deepest love. Affectionately your old Doccie O.

In December, 1918, it was:

You and Tom are in our thoughts always! What a calamity to lose such a darling - and what a fine fellow he would have been. One of the tragedies about dear Isaac [Revere Osler] is the loss he will be to all the younger ones - your darlings and Ottillie [Howard] and others. He would have been so helpful with his good sense, and sympathetic heart ... Love to you all Your loving Doccie O.

Osler was 70 and in the grip of the pulmonary infection to which he was to succumb on December 29, 1919, when he wrote “Dearest Marjorie” three weeks before his death:

How I wish I could be translated to Calvert [Street, the Futchers’ residence] just to play with you and the three darlings for a few weeks ... T.B. will have had my letter. Devil of an attack - nearly blew the lid off. Worried poor Grace sadly, I have never had such a cough. I am still coughing. I believe the whole business has been sentile whooping cough; sent to remind me that second childhood is at hand. Yours ever Doccie O.

Thereafter, the Futchers prospered in large houses in Baltimore until the Depression of the 1930s. Then William Osler’s frugal spirit must have sighed “I told them so” when they sustained serious financial worries. Thomas died in 1938; Marjorie survived as a widow till 1969, aged 87.

In retrospect, Marjorie had not been the only pebble on Osler’s beach of attractive young men. He interested himself in the younger Marjorie remains enigmatic.

Appointment of Frances Groen as Associate Director of Libraries

Mrs. Frances Groen has accepted the new post of Associate Director of Libraries at McGill University, effective November 1st, 1990. She will no longer be Life Sciences Area Librarian and, as such, an ex-officio member of the Board of Curators of the Osler Library. During her term of office as Life Sciences Area Librarian, she has taken an active interest in the affairs of the Osler Library and, indeed between the end of 1984, when Philip Teigen left us, and early 1986, when Faith Wallis was appointed History of Medicine Librarian, Mrs. Groen accepted at my request the post of Acting History of Medicine Librarian.

The following is an excerpt from the notice of her appointment as Associate Director of Libraries by Dr. Eric Ormsby, Director of Libraries, McGill University.

“Frances Groen is admirably qualified for this important new responsibility. As Area Librarian she has developed and refined an exemplary array of services to a disparate group of users; thanks to her, the Life Sciences Area has always been in the forefront of technological advances at McGill. Ms. Groen has also been unusually successful in developing support for the libraries in her charge. Moreover, through her work in the Medical Library Association and more recently, through her presidency of MLA, Frances Groen has achieved a high degree of recognition in North American academic libraries. Her experience, professionalism, knowledge and administrative ability, all make her exceptionally well suited for the Associate Director’s position."

We will miss her on our Board of Curators but she has assured us that her interest in the Osler Library will continue unabated. We are grateful for her continuing interest in the Osler Library and we wish her success and satisfaction in her new post.

E. H. Bensley

Harold Nathan Segall (1897-1990)

With the death of Dr. Harold N. Segall at the age of ninety-two on August 17th, the Osler Library has lost one of its best friends. In spite of his advanced age, death was sudden; he was at a business luncheon when he died.

Harold Segall received his M.D., C.M. from McGill in 1920. At that time, apart from his familiarity with Osler’s textbook of medicine, Osler was little more than a name to him. Then, in the year following his graduation, he came to know Dr. Maude Abbott. During this year, he was a Demonstrator in Pathology and an Assistant Curator of the McGill Medical Museum. Maude Abbott was a Lecturer in Pathology and the Curator of the Museum. No doubt Maude Abbott must have talked to him of her hero, William Osler. In any event, it is a matter of record that, at Christmas of 1920, Maude Abbott gave him a copy of Osler’s Aequanimitas with other Addresses. After reading this, he became an Oslerian and he remained an Oslerian throughout his long life. (But, it should be added, not an indiscriminate one; he was never indiscriminate). After the Osler Library opened in 1929, he lost no time in seeking out Dr. Francis and ever since then, a period of more than sixty years, he has taken a keen interest in all that concerns the Osler Library. He has been the generous and discriminating benefactor of the Library, particularly as the donor of many valuable books. In recent years, he has deposited in the Osler Library all his personal and professional papers, including patient records, research materials, student notebooks, and miscellaneous correspondence. This extensive collection will be especially important to students of the history of cardiology; cardiology was Dr. Segall’s chosen specialty. Finally, it should be mentioned that Dr. Segall has been an elected member of the Osler Library’s Board of Curators for almost twenty years. Small wonder that this appreciation was introduced by the statement that with the death of Dr. Segall the Osler Library has lost one of its best friends. He will be sorely missed.

E.H. Bensley
Dr. Faith Wallis on Year-Long Research Leave

The History of Medicine Librarian, Dr. Faith Wallis, will be on leave from the Osler Library for the period September 1990 - September 1991. She has been awarded a Research Grant with Release Time Stipend from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in order to pursue her research into the history of scientific chronology in the Middle Ages. This research will take her to Britain, where she will inspect manuscripts in London, Oxford, and Cambridge, and to Paris, where she will work at the Institut de recherches et d’histoire des textes.

In her absence, the Library will be in the care of her colleague Eleanor MacLean, Biological Sciences Librarian and head of the Blacker-Wood Library of Biology at McGill University. Miss MacLean’s home library has much in common with the Osler Library. One of its founders was a physician-historian, Dr. Casey Wood, whose passion for ornithology created an important collection of rare and unusual books and manuscripts on birds. Dr. Wood’s other passions, ophthalmology and oriental medicine, are reflected in his numerous gifts to the Osler Library, including a group of interesting Arabic and Persian manuscripts and lithograph books listed in the appendix of Bibliotheca Osleriana.

Miss MacLean’s professional formation and achievements ideally suit her for this interim post. After undergraduate training in biology, she took a degree in Library Science, and worked in various science libraries before coming to Blacker-Wood in 1972. She is very active in professional organizations particularly the Special Libraries Association, whose Biological Sciences Division she chaired in 1988-1989. She has published a number of articles, largely about the Osler Library she directs. Miss MacLean has a special interest in the history of science; she has contributed prefaces to exhibition catalogues and monographs featuring the Blacker-Wood’s historical treasures, and has mounted important historical exhibits for display both at McGill and abroad. We are delighted that she has consented to take on this temporary assignment. The Osler Library will benefit greatly from her high competence and her energetic leadership.

The Friends of the Osler Library: A Report and an Appeal

With each passing year, the Friends of the Osler Library contribute to an ever greater variety of projects and enterprises. During 1989-1990, donations from our Friends have helped us pay for Renaissance books and ultra-modern computers, for posters announcing visiting speakers and dressing for leather bindings, for microfilms, appraisals, and consultants.

The development of our collections is, of course, the Friends’ highest priority. Last year about $10,000 of the Friends’ fund went towards purchasing both rare books and current works. The Friends play a particularly vital role in the acquisition of valuable historic works specifically chosen to complement the core collection of the Bibliotheca Osleriana. An excellent example of such a purchase is Vittorio Trincavelli’s Enchiridion medicum de cognoscendis curandisque tam externis quam internis humani corporis morbis, printed in Basel in 1583. Trincavelli (1496-1568) practiced medicine in Venice, and simultaneously pursued a parallel career as an editor of Greek classical texts. He combined his two fields of interest to produce an eight-volume edition of the complete works of Galen between 1541 and 1545. Osler did not own this particular edition of Galen, but he did acquire Trincavelli’s translations of Galen’s De naturalium facultatum substantia and An sanguis in arteris natura continetur (Bibl. Osl. 389). The second of these two Galenic works bears witness to Trincavelli’s special interest in the vascular system. Along with Vesalius and many others, he was involved in an acrimonious contemporary debate on the theoretical principles of venesection. The second edition of his own treatise on venesection (Bibl. Osl. 4121) apparently appeared in response to the criticism of his views by Johannes Baptista Susius (Bibl. Osl. 4056). Though Trincavelli was a relatively minor figure of 16th century medicine, Osler’s modest collection of his works touches the most salient features of his career. Our new Trincavelli is, by contrast, a general medical text comprising 832 pages of diagnosis and treatment of everything from tuberculosis to head lice. The work is fairly rare, having been issued only in this edition, and only three copies are traceable through the National Union Catalogue.

At the other end of the publishing spectrum are two microfilm sets purchased by the Friends which enable students and scholars to consult unique manuscript and archival materials. Minute books, accounts and other documents from St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London provide rich resources for studying the development of this important institution between 1547 and 1801. The medieval manuscripts housed at the historical division of Yale University’s Medical Library have also been purchased on microfilm, and will be the subject of a special article by myself in Memini, the journal of the Societe des etudes medievales du Quebec.

McGill Medical Luminaries, the first volume of our new series Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine, was designed and printed using funds provided by the Friends. In a sense, the Friends can regard Luminaries as an investment as well as a donation, for revenues from sales will be added to the capital of the Friends Endowment Fund. The Osler Library Newsletter continues to rely on the generosity of the Friends, as do our speakers’ programme, conservation and preservation initiatives, and engagement of consultants for appraisals and cataloguing. This year, the Friends also helped us to acquire a new office computer. The old computer has been re-installed at the reference and circulation desk, enabling staff to work on various projects there during less busy times. This has increased our efficiency and productivity considerably.

With this issue of the Newsletter, we officially launch our appeal for donations for the 1990-1991 year. The support of the Friends is, more than ever, vital to our growth and the diversification of our programmes, and your confidence in the Library is profoundly appreciated.

Faith Wallis

N.B. Donations to the Friends of the Osler Library received since June 1990 will be recorded in the February 1991 Newsletter.

Editorial Committee for the Newsletter: Edward H. Bensley, Honorary Osler Librarian and Editor; Faith Wallis, History of Medicine Librarian and Associate Editor; Wayne LeBel, Assistant History of Medicine Librarian and Assistant Editor; Lily Szczygiel, Editorial Assistant.

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