

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

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THE LITERARY WORKS OF

SIR WILLIAM OSLER*



IT IS WITH A FEELING OF some reluctance that I am attempting to present, within the limits of a single paper, some brief commentary on the literary life-work of Sir William Osler. Indeed, as we read again and again the simple, clear, and yet striking passages from his numer-

ous essays, we find that a volume might be dedicated to the task of rightly appreciating those essays and the lessons which they carry to men in every walk of life.

Osler was essentially a student of men. But not content was he with a study of their bodies alone, although from that study he has given us the greatest textbook of Medicine of modern times; he must needs observe and study them in their relations to one another, to their everyday life and to their religion. From this study he has given us "Aequanimitas", "A Way of Life", and, yes, here I may include too, "Science and Immortality". For, when delivering this lecture under the Ingersoll Foundation at Harvard in 1904, instead of entering into some highly learned discussion of higher criticism, he has divided all men into three classes, — the Gallionians, who deny outright the existence of a future; the Laodiceans, who care naught for the matter one way or the other; and the little band of Teresians, who cling to their faith. He reported that he had careful records of about five hundred "death-beds", studied particularly with reference to the modes of death and the sensations of the dying; yet he limits his own opinion in the matter to the simple statement that he would "rather be mistaken with Plato than be in the right with those who deny altogether the life after death."

Next to the intimate knowledge of human nature which they display, perhaps the most outstanding feature of Osler's essays is the wide range of subject matter which they embrace. One would expect that when a great physician turns to purely literary, non-scientific writings he would write of the relations of "Doctor and Nurse", "Nurse and Patient", of "The Student Life", and the "Educational Value of a Medical Society". Osler has given us such works. But he has given us, too, "Science and War", pessimistic, but nevertheless showing an intimate knowledge of the advances in all the sciences brought about by the War, and of the British war-time organization.

The Osler Society of McGill University was founded by a group of medical students in 1921 and the first regular meeting with presentation of papers was held on October 19th of that year. The meeting took place in the home of Samuel E. Whitnall, Professor of Anatomy and first Honorary President of the fledgling society. One of the papers read at that meeting was entitled "The Literary Works of Sir William Osler." It was delivered by a third year medical student, R. Vance Ward. The manuscript of his paper has been preserved in the Osler Society archives and is published here for the first time. Dr. Ward, M.D., McGill, 1924, expressed pleasure on learning that his effort of more than fifty years ago is now to appear in print. He recalls that he devoted the summer of 1921 to two main activities — peddling aluminum kitchen utensils and working on this paper. The books required for his research were obtained by loan from the McGill Medical Library and Professor Whitnall's private library and by purchase from Miss Poole's bookstore. The library bequeathed by Sir William Osler to McGill University did not arrive in Montreal until the end of 1928. Thus Vance Ward prepared his address without the dual advantages enjoyed by many later members of the Osler Society — the invaluable assistance of the Osler Librarian, Dr. W.W. Francis, and the facilities of the Osler Library.

As a biographer, he has given us "Thomas Linacre", and as an historian, "Physic and Physicians as Depicted in Plato", a paper delivered before the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club. In "Teaching and Thinking", he has told us that these are the dual functions of a university.

May I here be pardoned a slight digression to give a quotation from the essay "Teaching and Thinking", a quotation which, particularly significant at the present time, shows the optimism and enthusiasm which Osler brought to the work at McGill:

With the wise co-operation of the university and the hospital authorities Montreal may become the Edinburgh of America, a great medical centre to which men will flock for sound learning, whose laboratories will attract the ablest students, and whose teaching will go out into all lands, universally recognized as of the highest and of the best type.

Nowhere is the outlook more encouraging than at McGill. What a guarantee of the future does the progress of the past decade afford! No city on this continent has endowed higher education so liberally.

*A paper read by R. Vance Ward at the first regular meeting of the Osler Society of McGill University, October 19th, 1921.

The decorated letter reproduced on this page is taken from *The Works of the Learned S^r Thomas Brown, Kt. Doctor of Physick, late of Norwich*, London, 1686. Copy presented to Osler in 1900 by Dr. Thomas McCrae. *Bibl. Osl.* 4522. (In this, as in some other works, the author's name appears as Brown instead of the more usual Browne).

There remains now to foster that undefinable something which, for want of a better term, we call the university spirit, a something which a rich institution may not have, and with which a poor one may be saturated, a something which is associated with men and not with money, which cannot be purchased in the market or grown to order, but which comes insensibly with loyal devotion to duty and to high ideals, and without which *Nehushtan* is written on the portals of any school of Medicine, however famous.

But great as were Osler's works on history and biography, in science, and in the art of teaching, the philosophy of his works has left the greatest impress on the minds of his readers. Mark you, I say, "the philosophy in his works", rather than "his philosophical works", for there is not one of his essays but breathes the spirit of sound inquiry into hidden things, that does not preach from the texts of loyalty to the best interests of the noblest of callings and a profound belief in the gospel of the day's work.

To follow the main currents of that philosophy shall be our next task; to consider for a few moments the message to youth, so well conceived, so clearly presented in "Aequanimitas" and "A Way of Life".

"Aequanimitas" brings to us one great lesson — the necessity for calmness of mind and great patience during all the crises and trials of life. Dr. Osler is giving his farewell address to the graduating class of the University of Pennsylvania; he begins by warning his hearers of the danger of betraying indecision and worry in the ordinary emergencies of medical practice; from these practical considerations he draws the lesson of application of a calm state of mind to the larger worries and cares of life — the failure of friends to measure up to our too high standards, the uncertainty of our science and our art, and failure itself in our life work.

And then we have "A Way of Life". How better can we sum up its message than in the words of Goethe, which Osler has taken for his text:—

What each day needs that shalt thou ask,
Each day will set its proper task.

He admits that young men are unfit students of philosophy, that "they will hear as though they heard not, and to no profit"; yet he offers to give them a habit of life. And simple indeed it is — so simple that we can easily imagine these same young men taking it to heart and profiting thereby. It is just this — that we should live our lives "for the day only, and for the day's work, *Life in day-tight compartments*". To some this may seem idle, but that it was the rule of Osler's life I am firmly convinced, for at the outset he tells us of the origin of his habit — his way of life. In his own words he says: "Much worried as to the future, partly about the final examination, partly as to what I should do afterwards, I picked up a volume of Carlyle, and on the page I opened there was a familiar sentence — '*Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand*'. A commonplace sentiment enough, but it hit and stuck and helped, and was the starting-point of a habit that has enabled me to utilize to the full the single talent entrusted to me".

Osler was sincere in the philosophy he has given us. It was all worked out in his own busy life and by himself alone. A religious touch it had too. Not the religion perhaps which he saw in his father's home, or under the good Dr. Johnson, but a fuller, broader, more practical conception of Christian-

ity was his. "Learn to know your Bible" he says, "though not perhaps as your fathers did. In forming character and shaping conduct, its touch has still its ancient power".

For mere theology and hollow form Osler has only shafts of keen humour. In "A Way of Life" he says — "Generations of ancestors, brooding over 'Providence, foreknowledge, will and fate, Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute' may have bred a New England conscience, morbidly sensitive, to heal which some of you had rather sing the 51st Psalm than follow Christ into the slums".

Of importance second only to the philosophy in his works, is Osler's contribution to the literature of medical ethics. He has given us a gem in the address before the Canadian Medical Association in 1902, "Chauvinism in Medicine". He defines this little-used term as "a narrow, illiberal spirit in matters national, provincial, collegiate, or personal". He tells us first of the four great features of the Medical Guild which should, and which do, largely, make for the world wide unity of its members — its noble ancestry, its remarkable solidarity, its progressive character, and the singular beneficence of its work. Then, by a masterpiece of oratory, he turns to the three manifestations of Chauvinism, namely, Nationalism, Provincialism and Parochialism. He heaps condemnation on that "cursed spirit of intolerance, conceived in distrust and bred in ignorance, that makes the mental attitude perennially antagonistic, even bitterly antagonistic, to everything foreign, that subordinates everywhere the race to the nation, forgetting the higher claims of human brotherhood;" on the wretched provincialism of our system of Medical Councils under which the practitioners of one state or province fear that the prestige of their profession will be ruined if a stranger be admitted, on the intolerant attitude towards graduates of another college; and on the distrust and lack of co-operation between the old practitioner and the young graduate newly come to the district. Oh, what shackles to the progress of Medicine in this country alone could the application of this advice by all, in private and public professional life, remove!

But not only does Osler counsel against narrowness in our relations toward others; he points out the danger to the doctor of a sort of internal Chauvinism, an absorption in his work which shuts out the broadening influence of good reading and social intercourse and which crushes independent thought and the proper spirit of skepticism. And from whom is this advice more practical, more worthy of consideration, than from one who, the greatest physician of his time, could yet find leisure to pursue classical studies which raised him to the Presidency of the Classical Association, to make himself a master of modern literature, and to give to us the works which we are now reviewing?

So much for the subject matter of Osler's writings, what of his style?

His sentences are short, clean-cut, and to the point, qualities due, no doubt, to the fact that nearly all his works were delivered in spoken form first. His subject matter is systematically arranged, yet there are no distinct breaks, a beautiful continuity runs through each essay; each division of the subject is linked to the preceding by some question here, some apt quotation there.

This brings us to the most outstanding features of Osler's style — the great number of classical references and literary quotations of which he makes use. From the Bible, and from

Shakespeare, from Omar Khayyam, and from Plato, from Browning and from Tennyson, he seems to draw at will his most beautiful similes and his most suitable texts. Nor is his knowledge limited to the works of the older writers alone. I was surprised and delighted, while reading "Chauvinism in Medicine" to see the work of the country practitioner described in the words of our own Dr. Drummond, "He's the only man, I know me, don't get no holiday".

Books and libraries were the hobby of Sir William Osler. The library which he collected during a lifetime of reading, he has willed to us here at McGill. May I here confess to the feeling, the thought that has been uppermost in my mind while reading Osler during the past summer:— nothing more or less than a sort of joyful anticipation of the privileges of Osler's library, so soon to come to us, for in nothing, better than in his essays, is the image of the worth of that library reflected.

A word in passing on his humour. Everywhere throughout his essays it stands out, making them very readable. Often it partakes of the nature of satire, but never without just cause. Once, perhaps, his sense of humour carried him too far; I refer to the address "The Fixed Period", delivered as a valedictory when Osler was leaving Johns Hopkins University to take the position of Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. In speaking of the great advantages to be gained by the setting of a fixed period for the teacher, either of time or of service, he laughingly suggested the extension of Anthony Trollope's plan of the peaceful departure by chloroform of all men at the age of sixty. The speech was at once flashed broadcast; many took it seriously, much more seriously than it was meant. Much discussion followed, a discussion which was renewed upon the death of Sir William in 1919.

And now, one last thought. What, in a broad general way, have been the results of Osler's literary work? We have heard much about the results of his professional work — the introduction of clinical methods of teaching into American medical schools, the revival of interest in medical societies, his great "The Principles and Practice of Medicine"; what I ask you, in closing, are the results of his purely literary works?

The first, and greatest. I think, is this. He has held up to us an ideal professional life, a life not devoted to medicine to the exclusion of all else, but combining knowledge and appreciation of all that is good and beautiful in literature with great scientific attainment. That such a life, such a career, is possible he has shown us by the example of his own.

Secondly, he has given us a code of professional ethics which will stand — a code for doctor and for nurse alike.

Lastly, he has thrown his whole literary effort into the cause of "Unity, Peace and Concord" in the medical profession. Just as in a quiet personal way his influence was always towards the union of warring factions, so has he in his writings ever sounded the note of peace, a peace urgently needed in the profession. And who can say that it has not been, will not be, heard?

Editorial Committee for the *Newsletter*: E.H. Bensley, Editor; Ronda Wohl, Associate Editor; Philip Teigen, Librarian; Penelope Scheuer, Editorial Assistant; Karl Holeczek, Photography.

BORIS P. BABKIN PAPERS

A guide to the papers of Boris Petrovich Babkin in the Osler Library has been prepared by two students in the McGill Graduate School of Library Science, Tania Gorn and Pamela Cline, working under the supervision of Mr. J.C.L. Andreasen, McGill University Archivist. Babkin (1877-1950) was a physiologist who had been a student, assistant, lifelong friend, and finally biographer of Ivan P. Pavlov. These Babkin papers, bequeathed to McGill University by Dr. Babkin and now housed in the Osler Library, include lecture notes, manuscripts and reprints, correspondence with Pavlov and his family, and material used in writing *Pavlov: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). Copies of this guide are available without charge from P.M. Teigen, Osler Library, McIntyre Medical Sciences Building, 3655 Drummond St., Montreal, P.Q. H3G 1Y6.

A SAMPLE OF FRANCISCAN VERSE

The following was written by Dr. W.W. Francis, first Osler Librarian and inveterate rhymster, about 1953 for his eldest grandson, Michael Kelen, age 5 years. Michael found it hard to believe that his grandfather, "old Willie", had served in World War One, but, if this really was so, then Michael supposed he took his favourite chair with him.

"Mummy, do you mean to say that old Willie was in the first world war? Did he take his blue arm-chair?"

FOR MIKEY

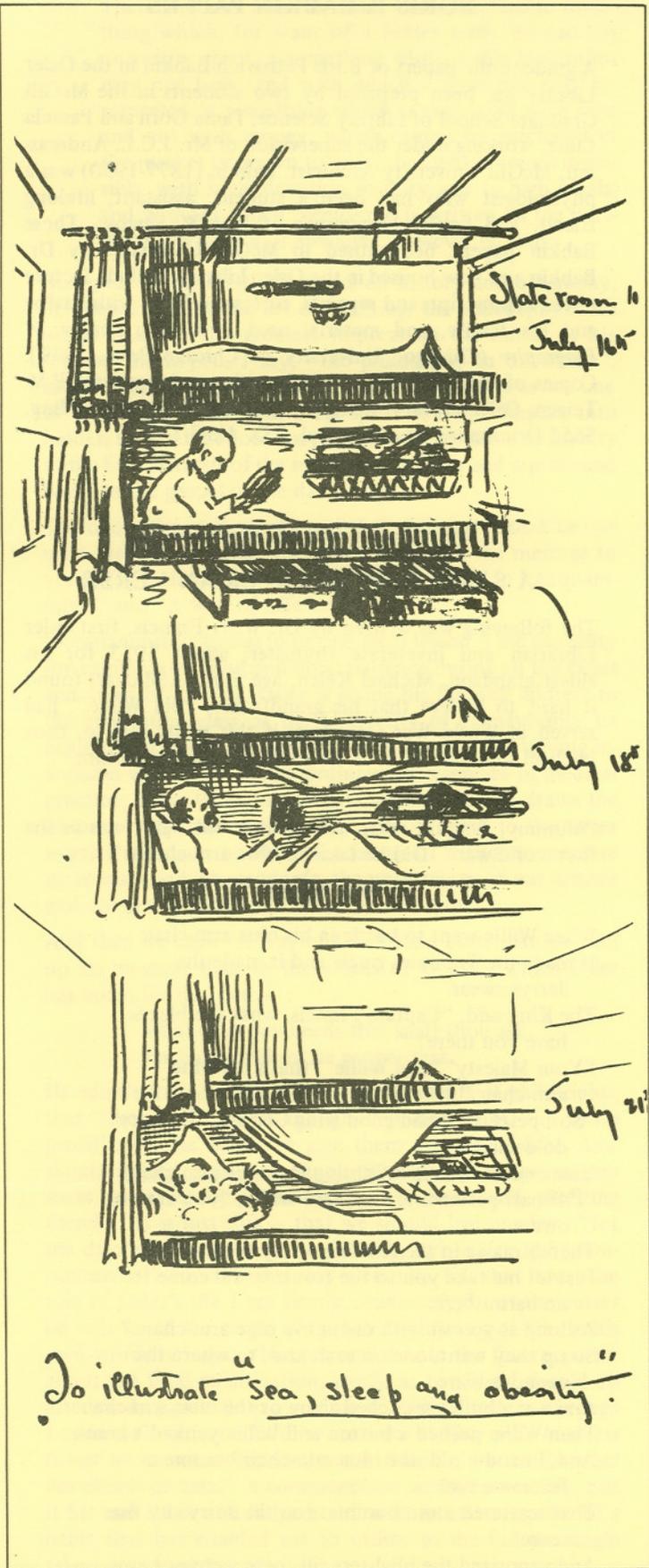
When Willie went to battle in his blue arm-chair
It made the Tommies giggle and it made the
Jerrys swear.
The King said, "Captain Francis, what the blazes
have you there?"
"Your Majesty", said Willie, "that's my blue
arm-chair."
"So I perceive," said good King George, "I umpty
do declare
You cannot do much fighting in a blue arm-chair!"
"Piff-paff-perumsky, Sir," said Willie, "you are not
aware
There's magic in the stuffing of my blue arm-chair.
Just let me take you to the front; you'll come to
no harm there
As long as you sit with me in my blue arm-chair."
So up they went, one on each arm, to where the
cannons blare,
And not a bullet scratched them or the blue arm-chair.
Then Willie pushed a button and Willie yanked a crank
And, lo and b'old, the blue arm-chair became a
fearsome tank
That scattered atom bomblets on the Jerrys by the
score
And vaporized the blighters till there were not any
more!
"Field Marshal Francis," said the King, "why do you
look so sore?"
"BECAUSE MY FUTURE GRANDSON WON'T
BELIEVE I WON THE WAR!"

A previous *Newsletter* (June 1976) reported that McGill University has established an Osler Day to be observed annually on the day of the meeting of the Board of Curators of the Osler Library and the Osler Society Banquet. An addition to the events of that Day is the Osler Lecture. The first Osler Day falls on April 20th, 1977 and the Lectureship will be inaugurated by Dr. Jean Mayer, President of Tufts University in Boston. Dr. Mayer, formerly Professor of Nutrition and Lecturer in the History of Public Health at Harvard, is internationally known for his work on human nutrition and world food problems. He will speak on "Nutritional Problems of the Rich and the Poor."

A HARVEY CUSHING CARTOON

In July 1904 William Osler sailed for England on the S.S. Campania. One of his companions was Harvey Cushing who provided the following description of Osler's habits of work aboard ship. "His first act was to fill to overflowing the rack in his berth with the books and papers he intended to use. Always the first awake, he stayed in his bunk all morning reading and writing for some four or five hours,"* In the sketch on this page, Cushing depicted Osler at work in his stateroom with a companion in the upper berth who obviously did not share Osler's frugality and industry. This sketch appeared in John F. Fulton, *Harvey Cushing: A Biography*; Springfield, Illinois, Charles C Thomas, 1946, p. 234. Permission to publish in this *Newsletter* was kindly granted by the Yale Medical Historical Library which has in its possession Harvey Cushing's original drawing.

*Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925, vol. 1, p. 647.



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