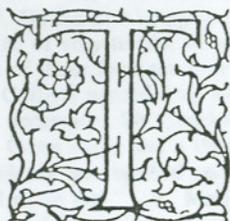


# OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

No. 50 - October 1985

## A COMMENTARY ON THE LAST ILLNESS OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER



HE CLINICAL NOTES that the late Dr. Thomas Archibald (Archie) Malloch recorded about Sir William Osler's last illness appeared in a previous *Osler Library Newsletter* (No. 47, October 1984), prepared by Harvey Blackman and Philip Teigen. When their work was in

progress, they invited me to compose some comments on that illness from the point of view of an internist-cardiologist who graduated M.D. at McGill in 1920. I accepted this very interesting task and now find myself greatly indebted to them and to Dr. Faith Wallis and Meera Ashtakala of the Osler Library for much help in assembling pertinent documents and to Dr. E.H. Bensley and Professor A.E. Malloch for valuable information and constructive criticism.

The Osler Library Archives do not contain a routine, formal clinical history on Osler, such as an intern records for a patient, newly admitted to the hospital. Nor did Osler maintain a systematic, continual private record of disturbances in his health. Cushing assembled references to Osler's illnesses from letters and postcards Osler wrote to friends, occasional memoranda about illness that he jotted down in his account book, correspondence maintained by Lady Osler and some clinical notes made by the physicians and surgeons who attended him during the last illness. Dr. Archie Malloch's notes, published in the *Osler Library Newsletter*, are the most complete for a period of twenty-five consecutive days which began on 5 December 1919 and ended on the 29th when Osler died.

When in his late forties, Osler began to have, almost annually, acute bronchopulmonary illnesses which he said he enjoyed as literary holidays. However, in his later years, recovery of his normal buoyancy began to require rather longer convalescence. When the influenza pandemic reached Oxford in October 1918, it struck him but because of his many obligations related to the war and the great demands on the medical practitioners in Oxford created by the pandemic, he soon resumed his activities including house calls for the families of physicians. On 16 November 1918, W.T. Longcope visited 13 Norham Gardens for the first time since 1907. Later, in 1949, he wrote of this visit:

... we found the house chilly, with most of the rooms closed .... In the library, Sir William stood in front of the mantel, his back to a miserable little fire in the grate, trying to warm his hands. All the buoyancy and gaiety and the engaging wave of the hand had disappeared. The wonderful Chief had shrunken to a little old gentleman.

He had recurrences of febrile bronchopulmonary illness in December 1918 and again in July 1919, at the time of the celebration of his 70th birthday. His speech of acceptance of the two Festschrift volumes was interrupted by coughing. Early in August Sir William and Lady Osler went for a six weeks seaside holiday to Jersey. Before returning home he wrote: "I have got back, I am

The leading article in this issue is by Dr. Harold N. Segall, who was in his final medical undergraduate year at McGill when Osler died. Since then, Dr. Segall has had an extensive experience in internal medicine with special reference to cardiology. With his knowledge of medical practice over this long period, he is especially well qualified to comment on the quality of the care which Osler received in his last illness.

sure, the 21 pounds I had lost, and no longer see my ribs ... I am a new man—and my handsprings in the sea are much admired."

This sense of well-being was too soon interrupted by the onset of his last illness. On 22 September he journeyed to Glasgow for a consultation. He went on to visit friends in Edinburgh, and there he boarded a train for the return journey on Friday evening. A railroad strike stopped the train in Newcastle on Saturday morning. A friend found someone who drove him to Oxford in an old, slow car. He left Newcastle at 11 a.m. on Saturday and arrived home at 3 p.m. on Sunday. He had to spend the night in an old inn. Yet another "cold" followed this. On the 6th of October he wrote to Sir George Newman: "Here I am in bed again with a recurrence of that bronchitis which will prevent my being at the meeting on the 9th." Cushing wrote of this period:

He had begun to have a good deal of fever by this time, with a most distressing cough and his colleagues of the Radcliffe Infirmary, A.G. Gibson and William Collier, brought in to see him, found him by no means an amenable patient. No easy task for younger men to attend their Chief, threatened with a malady of which he knew much more than they, and whose fever was likely to make him more frolicsome than usual.

On 9 November he had written to Miss Humpton, his former secretary in Baltimore:

I have been having a devil of a time—in bed six weeks!—a paroxysmal bronchitis, not in either of your books! Fever for a week, temperature to 102.5; practically no physical signs; cough constant, short couples and then bouts, as bad as whooping cough .... Then the other night, eleven o'clock, acute pleurisy. A stab and then fireworks, pain on coughing and deep breath, but 12 hours later a bout arrived which ripped all pleural attachments to smithereens, and with it the pain, not a twinge since! but a dry rub which I can feel now as I breathe and hear like a rhoncus. Very strange attack. I am very comfortable except in my paroxysms. All bronchial therapy is futile—there is nothing my good doctors have not had me try, but the only things of any service whatever in checking the cough have been opiates—a good drink of the paregoric bottle or a hypodermic of morphin. I have a splendid nurse.

The initial letter on this page is an English design dating from about 1900 reproduced from Alexander Nesbitt (ed.), *Decorative alphabets and initials*, Dover Publications, Inc., 1959.

At Osler's request, Sir William Hale-White came to see him on 10 November. He agreed there was pleurisy but no signs of fluid. He came again 4 December and suggested tapping the right pleura for fluid. Gibson performed the thoracentesis but found no fluid. Dr. T. Archibald Malloch wrote the first entry in his notes on 5 December. On that day Sir Thomas Horder came and explored the right pleural cavity with appropriate long needles and withdrew 14 oz. turbid yellow fluid. There followed some improvement, notably less frequent cough. On 10 December Osler wrote a note to Sir Thomas, "The infection is still strongly entrenched, and the irritative cough seems only to be kept in check by the morphin ...." On 14 December Sir Thomas drew off a pint of clear fluid. On the 21st he again explored and from one area withdrew a few cc of very turbid, brownish pus with a very foul odor. In the light of these facts the four physicians (Horder, Gibson, Malloch and Collier) agreed a surgical operation for establishing drainage was necessary. Sir Charles Gordon-Watson and his anaesthetist Mr. Cross came and a thoracotomy was performed on the 22nd; the pleura was opened and "10-12 oz. of blood-stained, stinking fluid came out." Dr. Malloch's daily clinical notes describe the events of the following week which culminated in death on 29th December.

In reflecting on the medical professional skills brought to bear on Osler's illness, one must recognize Osler himself as a very significant member of the team. He correctly diagnosed the pleurisy and expected the search for pus. Dr. Alexander Gordon Gibson (1875-1950) had been appointed House Physician at the Radcliffe Infirmary in 1905. When Osler began his functions as Regius Professor, he found Gibson a very good co-worker. Gibson chose to concentrate his special interest on both pathology and clinical medicine. The experience of the next fifteen years, especially the close relationship with Osler, rendered him a skillful, mature clinician. It was he who first drew attention to the third heart sound (1907). He wrote two chapters on the heart and co-authored another with Osler for volume IV of the seven volume *Osler's Modern Medicine* (1907). William Tregonwell Collier (1889-1932), the son of a prominent Oxford physician, was then at the beginning of his postgraduate career after being demobilized from the Royal Army Medical Corps which he had joined in 1915 after graduating from the University College London Medical School, a gold medalist. Sir William Hale-White, a friend of many years, on his first visit could allay Lady Osler's anxiety and give support to Gibson and Collier. On his second, he recommended thoracentesis in agreement with the others. In 1919 Sir Thomas Horder, later Lord Horder (1871-1955), was at or near the peak of his career. He had pioneered the use of clinical laboratory procedures. He designed what came to be known as "the Horder's box," a kit which contained supplies for haematological, chemical, and bacteriological tests for use when on house calls. It was marketed by Burroughs, Wellcome. His reputation for brilliance in diagnosis and management of illness made him the consultant of last resort in obscure or desperate cases. Early in his career he attended King Edward VII in 1910 and subsequently four succeeding monarchs and their families. Sir Charles Gordon-Watson (1874-1949), a leading surgeon at Barts, and Mr. Cross were probably chosen by Horder for he too worked at Barts. Mr. Arthur P. Dodds-Parker (1867-1940) was on the surgical staff of the Radcliffe Infirmary.

Dr. Thomas Archibald Malloch (1887-1953) served both as a well informed, young physician and as a deputy son. The *Osler Library Newsletters* of October 1980 and February 1981 tell of his activities in military service and his intimate relationship to the Osler Library. His father, Dr. Archibald Edward Malloch (1844-1919) first met Osler in Hamilton when Osler was a student and Malloch a young practitioner of medicine and surgery. Archie first met Osler in 1912, a year before his graduation from McGill, when he accompanied his father on a visit to 13 Norham Gardens.

During the war he spent his leaves with the Oslers and after the war he visited them regularly on weekends. As coincidence would have it he was exceptionally well informed about infections in the respiratory system. In 1917 he wrote an article about a case of tuberculous bronchopneumonia with pneumothorax. In 1918 he co-authored, with Major Lawrence J. Rhea, the pathologist of the Montreal General Hospital who was attached to No. 3 General Hospital, an article on "Lobar Pneumonia in a Base Hospital in France". In 1919 he wrote an article on the bacteriology of epidemic influenza, and in that year also he co-authored with Rhea a report of two cases of bacillus influenzae endocarditis. At the No. 3 General he filled the vacancy on the medical team when John McCrae died.

"Sir William has several times said to me 'any success I have had as a consultant has been due to a knowledge of the proper use of digitalis and opium.'" This sentence appears in Archie Malloch's tribute, his contribution to the special Osler Memorial Number of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (July 1920). In Malloch's clinical note of 6 December there is: "He asked to have 1/4 [grain of morphine sulphate] (after the 1/2 taken on going to sleep) if he woke up about four." This strongly suggests that Osler contributed his wisdom in managing this aspect of therapy. It was effective for both control of cough and prevention of insomnia. On this day also, the 6th December, digitalis therapy was started with tincture of digitalis, twenty minims presumably three times a day. A good, freshly made tincture consisted of 10 grams of powdered leaf in 100 cc of alcohol. Therefore 60 minims (4 cc) contained 400 mgs. of digitalis, a generous daily dose, having in mind that the average daily dose required for maintenance of digitalization is about 100 mgs. He did have nausea and vomiting. When this occurred during or immediately after a severe bout of coughing or after an extra dose of morphine, digitalis may have been only slightly, if at all, responsible. If the tincture were rather old and therefore less potent, it may have contained an effective but non-toxic dose. He had some unspecified cough medicines which were ineffective, and a bare minimum of others, 10 grains (600 mgs.) of aspirin on one occasion and castor oil, once. The strychnine given about an hour before he expired was what physicians at that time gave in desperation to save life, a noble but useless gesture.

It was on that same day, the 6th December, that Osler, in a dialogue with Malloch said: "Archie, you lunatic, I've been watching this case for two months and I'm sorry I shall not see the postmortem." "Well, at any rate the books are there; do you know about Michael Angelo [sic] and his tomb? So pathetic. Well, it's Michael Angelo [sic] and his tomb and Osler and his library." Two days later he said to Gibson in the presence of Collier and Malloch, "Remember the brain is not yours; you're all here as witnesses. It is to go to the institute at Wistar ...." Three weeks later Gibson performed the postmortem at 13 Norham Gardens.

In 1974 two papers appeared which contain excellent clinico-pathological analyses of Osler's last illness. One, entitled "Did Sir William Osler Have Carcinoma of the Lung?" by Dr. A.H.T. Robb-Smith of Oxford properly demolishes an unfounded rumor. Robb-Smith had access to the archives in the Osler Library including Dr. Gibson's report of the postmortem; he quotes the part that describes the thoracic organs which confirms the clinical diagnoses. The other paper, "A Case of Empyema: Notes on the Last Illness of Sir William Osler," by Jeremiah A. Barondess also contains pertinent details of the illness and the autopsy report is quoted in full. There are also reproductions of temperature charts and of some notes made by Gibson as well as a note written by Osler, addressed to Gibson; it is undated but the contents suggest it was written early in the illness; important symptoms and signs are described in a jovial, lighthearted vein. Dr. Barondess concludes in stating:

One is struck by the expertise with which the illness was managed by Sir William's physicians, the more so in light of the fact, as noted above, that he was cared for at home throughout, with no X-rays and only a few simple laboratory procedures available. Physical signs were carefully elicited and followed, as demonstrated in Gibson's elegant notes ....

Dr. Barondess delivered this paper at a meeting of the American Clinical and Climatological Association and elicited a question from Dr. John Utz, a pathologist, "... is it really true that he had his rib resected at home?..." Dr. Barondess replied, "As far as I have been able to determine, this resection was indeed carried out at home." The notes by Dr. Archie Malloch did not come to light until 1984.

The postmortem examination confirmed the clinical diagnosis and the medical and surgical therapy included the maximum available in 1919. If he had been admitted to a hospital, would he have fared any better? The answer is no. An X-ray examination would have confirmed the clinical diagnosis of empyema. The question of lung abscess would not have been clearly answered and the diagnosis would have depended on what could be and was done at home. Electrocardiograms would have identified the nature of the arrhythmia which Osler, on one occasion, named delirium cordis, the old name for auricular (atrial) fibrillation. Osler used the new term in his text book (8th edition, 1912) two years after Thomas Lewis identified and named this arrhythmia. Assuming that atrial fibrillation was paroxysmal or perhaps continual, the digitalis therapy was correct as to dosage for maintaining a normal heart rate. And it is normal for the rate to increase in the presence of fever or a toxic state in spite of digitalization. Electrocardiograms probably would not have contributed any significant guidance to therapy. The five physicians who attended Osler belonged to the generation who knew only the stethoscope as a diagnostic instrument. Hale-White graduated in 1880 and Horder in 1896; they and their contemporaries were the teachers for the generations represented by Gibson who graduated in 1904, Malloch in 1913 and Collier in 1915. The pneumatic cuff for measuring arterial pressure was invented in 1896 and Korotkoff demonstrated measurement of systolic and diastolic levels of arterial pressure by listening over the brachial artery in 1905. But none of these five excellent physicians mentioned arterial pressure and apparently it was not measured. In his contribution to Osler's Festschrift, Dr. Frederick T. Lord of Boston wrote about lung abscess. He found it necessary, in 1919, to declare X-ray examination "an indispensable method and an important educational measure for the physician ...." Osler himself and the five physicians felt quite secure as to the diagnosis without recourse to X-ray examination. In 1919 thoracic surgery was limited in its scope. The techniques which permit various degrees of pneumonectomy were coming but would not arrive until a decade later.

Early in November the suggestion that he go to a warm climate such as the Riviera, drew from him a remark to the effect that he preferred "to be translated to heaven" from his own bed. Allowing the illness to unfold at home permitted him to have some pleasant interludes. Lady Osler, his devoted young friend Archie, and his books were with him at home. When he lacked the strength to hold a book they would read to him. He was fond of Walter Pater's essays. Lady Osler read *Marius the Epicurean* and Archie the essay on Sir Thomas Browne. At one point he asked Archie to bring him his precious volume of *Religio Medici* (1862 edition); and Archie commented, "He looked something up in it." In all respects Osler received the very best of medical and surgical treatment available in 1919 and precisely there where he wished to be during his final illness, at home.

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Harold N. Segall

Perhaps the greatest of the many pleasures associated with my present position as Acting History of Medicine Librarian (pending the appointment of a successor to Dr Teigen) is that of thanking the 290 Friends of the Osler Library who contributed over \$11,500 during the 1984-1985 fund-raising year. Donors have been acknowledged individually in the February and June *Newsletters*; those who have contributed since June will be listed in the February 1986 *Newsletter*. The support of our Friends is gratifying both for its own sake, and as an expression of enthusiasm for and confidence in the Osler Library.

The printing and mailing of the *Osler Library Newsletter* is funded from the Friends' donations, as are a number of special projects and purchases. This year, the Friends added to the Library's shelves two magnificent facsimiles of medieval medical manuscripts. The first is a reproduction of Zurich Centralbibliothek MS C 54, a richly illustrated volume made in Nuremberg in the middle decades of the fifteenth century. Its theme is "Time and Medicine" and it depicts in 54 coloured miniatures principles of health and diagnosis based on the harmony of the four humours of the human body with the Zodiac signs, the planets, the months and seasons of the year. The second facsimile is the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, an encyclopaedia of the properties of various herbs, fruits, and other foods, with recipes for their use in health and illness. The original, now in the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, was written in Venice in 1490. Elegant Humanist calligraphy and almost 300 exquisite illustrations give a special charm to this volume. Both facsimiles are accompanied by extensive scholarly commentary. Donations from the Friends also allowed us to purchase the twenty volumes of *P'u-chi fang*, a compendium of pre-Ming and early Ming dynasty Chinese medicine, based on an eighteenth century manuscript now in Taiwan. All of these acquisitions, as well as the numerous other projects funded through the Friends' endowment, contribute to the research potential of the Osler Library.

With this issue of the *Newsletter* we launch our appeal to the Friends of the Osler Library for the 1985-1986 academic year. Friends and readers who wish to contribute are asked to fill in the enclosed form and return it with their cheque to the appropriate address.

Frances Groen

### OSLER LIBRARY FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM FOR 1986

For the second consecutive year, the Osler Library is sponsoring a fellowship program. This program is designed to assist those who need to travel to and establish temporary residence in Montreal while undertaking research at the Osler Library. The stipend is \$1,000 (Canadian), and the fellowship may be held for one month during the calendar year 1986. Applications will be judged on the merit of previous scholarship, on the cogency of the proposed research to be undertaken in the Osler Library, and on the appropriateness of the Library's holdings to that research. For further information, contact Frances Groen, Osler Library, 3655 Drummond Street, Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1Y6. The deadline for application is December 31, 1985.

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*The Twilight Years of Lady Osler* is the title of a recent book by Frederick B. Wagner, Junior, Grace Revere Osler Emeritus Professor of Surgery and University Historian, Jefferson Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University.\* It is based largely on a collection of letters, postcards and telegrams from Lady Osler collected in a scrapbook by Dr. T. Archibald Malloch and given to the Osler Library by Mrs. T. Archibald Malloch.† Dr. Wagner has supplemented this material by the insertion in the text of many welcome explanatory passages and the addition of an abundance of useful footnotes. Through this book, Lady Osler provides an intimate and somewhat startling picture of life in the "Open Arms" following the death of her husband.

Dr. George T. Harrell has contributed a perceptive foreword. In it he reminds us that Lady Osler was a true Victorian lady whose lifelong mission was to care for her men and make their lives pleasant. With the loss of her son and then her husband, she felt alone and useless. Dr. Harrell concludes his foreword by the following statement with which, I believe, readers will agree, "The accurate, detailed researching, the sensitive selection and editing of the letters by Dr. Wagner make this trying period of a wonderful lady come alive."

\*Wagner Jr., Frederick B: *The Twilight Years of Lady Osler: Letters of a Doctor's Wife*, Science History Publications, U.S.A., a division of Watson Publishing International, P.O. Box 493, Canton, MA, 02021, 1985.

†Osler Library MS.573: Osler, Grace Revere (1854-1928), letters, postcards, telegrams to T.A. Malloch, A.E. Malloch and Mrs. T.A. Malloch, 1915-1928, ca.642 items.

E.H.B.

### IN FLANDERS FIELDS: THE STORY OF JOHN McCRAE

The Osler Library has received, as a gift from its author, a copy of John F. Prescott, *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae* (The Boston Mills Press, 98 Main Street, Erin, Ontario, N0B 1T0, 1985). This biography is drawn from a great variety of primary and secondary sources; the primary sources include the Osler Library. When, six years ago, I first heard of Dr. Prescott's plan, my thought was that, in view of the considerable amount of published material about John McCrae, there was little or no need for a full-scale biography. But, after reading a preliminary draft of Dr. Prescott's manuscript, I realized I was probably wrong and now the final product shows how very wrong I was. In this biography, John McCrae is portrayed more realistically and in greater depth than anyone has achieved before. It makes fascinating reading, and we of the Osler Library are proud to have been of help to the author.

E.H.B.

Editorial Committee for the *Newsletter*: Edward H. Bensley, Honorary Osler Librarian and Editor; Frances Groen, Life Sciences Area Librarian and Acting History of Medicine Librarian; Faith Wallis, Assistant History of Medicine Librarian; Elizabeth Ricci, Editorial Assistant.