

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

No. 8 – OCTOBER 1971

W.W. FRANCIS PATRON OF THE OSLER SOCIETY*



s part of the observance of the 50th anniversary of the Osler Society of McGill University, the student members decided that the Osler Banquet Address should be devoted to recalling the memory of Dr. W.W. Francis. That I should have been chosen to deliver this address is a compliment to me and I am deeply appreciative.

But more importantly, the choice of the topic is a compliment to Dr. Francis from a group of students who have never known or even seen him, for he died more than ten years ago. None of us is likely to be so honoured by a later generation of students. If Dr. Francis were aware of this honour, he would probably respond with one of his favourite quotations from The Gospel According to Saint John – “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.” I echo this sentiment and, in so doing, I note that this may be the first occasion in recent years on which a member of the faculty has risen up and called the students blessed. High time, in my opinion!

My earliest thought on accepting your invitation was to discover what advice Dr. Francis might have offered concerning the preparation of this address. I found the answer buried in the voluminous Franciscan correspondence files of the Osler Library, files upon which I will draw frequently this evening. He wrote, “The best way to deal with these – memorial lectures is first to make your bow to the person commemorated and fill the rest of the time with a subject that interests you yourself.” The implication is clear but the advice does not apply to me. I am genuinely interested in Dr. Francis; otherwise I would not have accepted your invitation.

In my title, Dr. Francis is described as “Patron of the Osler Society.” The word “patron” was chosen with care. Amongst its many definitions, as recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary, are the following: one who lends his influential support to advance the interests of some cause or undertaking; an advocate, champion, upholder or protector; one who stands to others in relations analogous to those of a father. These well describe the role which Dr. Francis played in the Osler Society.

The Osler Society was founded in 1921 by a group of medical students and Dr. Francis was not a founding member. However, he was indirectly involved since the Society was established in anticipation of the supposedly imminent arrival at McGill of the Osler Library with Dr. Francis as Osler Librarian. This did not materialize until eight years had passed, but in the twenties arrival was expected, if not momentarily, at least annually. The cause of the delay is well known. Dr. Francis, assisted by R.H. Hill, Archibald Malloch and Leonard Mackall, was at Oxford cataloguing Osler's library and preparing the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*. Always a meticulous worker, Dr. Francis refused to be hurried; the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* must be as perfect as possible and McGill must wait. In the end, the *Bibliotheca* was a magnificent achievement, fully justifying the long seven years taken to produce it and the delays involved.

At last in 1929 the Osler Library came to McGill. Dr. Francis was introduced to the Osler Society on January 29, 1929 and elected Honorary President the same year. There was an immediate change in the character of the Society. After a brave and spirited start in 1921, its meetings had grown dull and pedantic. Now, with Dr. Francis in attendance, they became lively and interesting with abundant touches of humour. For the next 30 years, from 1929 to his death in 1959, Dr. Francis was a staunch supporter of the Society. He helped members find suitable topics, provided source material, advised on manner of presentation, attended every meeting except when prevented by illness, brought out treasures from the Library relevant to the subjects under discussion, and, at the end of each presentation, offered his gentle but pointed criticisms. The Annual Osler Banquet was his joy and delight. Each year he helped with every detail from the choice of a speaker to selection of appropriate quotations for the menu. He was solely responsible for suggesting the use of Osler's arms on the menu cover, the ritual of the famous loving cup and the passing of the cigar box.** Perhaps this loving cup ritual deserves special mention. During Dr. Francis' lifetime, there were murmurings of discontent on the ground that the practice was unsanitary but no one dared to speak openly. After Dr. Francis died, the Dean, Dr. Lloyd Stevenson, took action. He declared the ritual a menace to health and ordered it discontinued. And so it was dropped, but not for long. No Dean can triumph over the spirit of Dr. Francis. The unsanitary ritual has been reinstated and practised tonight with even more than usual enthusiasm.

*Address delivered by Dr. E.H. Bensley of the Department of the History of Medicine at the Fiftieth Anniversary Commemorative Banquet of the Osler Society of McGill University, April 1, 1971.

**These features of the Osler Banquet are described in Stevenson, L.G., MacDermot, H.E. and Bensley, E.H. (edd.): *W.W. Francis. Tributes from his friends*, Osler Society of McGill University, 1956, p. 107. Material from these tributes has been used freely in preparing this address.

There was another more important matter in which Dr. Francis was opposed by some members of the Osler Society. This concerned the admission of women. The Society had been founded as an exclusively male organization. Dr. Francis did not approve. Many years later he recalled this conflict with a trace of bitterness rare for him. A paper was to be presented on Osler's writings. Dr. Maude Abbott knew more about them than anyone else. Dr. Francis pleaded earnestly that, in spite of the rule specifying only males, for once at least they should slip Maude Abbott in as a guest critic. The President, "a learned and cynical woman-hater," refused and pointed out that Dr. Francis was only a sort of dry-nurse to the Society with no vote. When he told this sorry story, Dr. Francis remarked, "Perhaps the ladies will be glad to know that he (the President) met his nemesis in the kind of wife he deserved. I heard that she nagged him to death, poor devil, so I hold him no ill will. Fortunately, I have forgotten his name." Eventually in 1937 Maude Abbott was made an Honorary Member, but only after what Dr. Francis described as years of the use of battering rams — hers and his. Not until 1945 were women admitted as student members. In retrospect the exclusion of women seems strange indeed when one considers the debt we owe them — especially Miss Cécile Desbarats, second only to Dr. Francis as a tower of strength to the Osler Society.

To this point I have spoken of Dr. Francis in relation to the Osler Society. Now something should be said about his larger role as medical historian and librarian beyond his work for the Society. What he did for the Osler Society, he did also on a more extensive scale and in greater depth for the physicians and historians of two continents. Through a truly voluminous correspondence, he provided a consulting service in the history of medicine, ranging from finding a useful item of source material or an apt quotation for some specific occasion to serving as an authoritative critic to the writers of some of the outstanding works in medical history. Year after year he sat at his desk in the Osler Library, tracing references, deciphering manuscripts, pouncing on errors in proofs and working out historical problems with endless patience, all for the benefit of the writings of others. In spite of their scholarly content, his letters were far from pedantic. Personal items were scattered throughout — bits of news from Montreal, expressions of friendship and sympathy, kindly enquiries. And there were disarming items such as these — "When you sent me the form I found I needed a stamp, and when I got you to send me the stamp I couldn't find the order. Now I can't find either order or stamp." "Some out of town doctor was asking after you affectionately the other day. I am blessed if I can remember who it was."

Enough has been said to indicate that Dr. Francis was always ready to help others write for publication. But he did not wish to be an author himself. He had a clear concept of what he regarded as his proper area of responsibility. On one occasion he wrote, "Perhaps I deserve brickbats for sterility more than bouquets for altruism. Wallowing in these resources (of the Osler Library), I write nothing myself for print if I can avoid it. So it is only decent to play midwife or nursemaid to my friends' brain-children." He even had misgivings about his role as chief editor of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*. In a letter written July 12, 1929, he noted that this would have been Osler's 80th birthday and then he added, "How I wish he could have brought out the *Bibliotheca* himself, and perhaps I could have helped him."

Earlier in this address I made some remarks about the loving cup ritual which might be construed as unfavourable to Dr. Lloyd Stevenson. Let me redeem myself by recalling that Lloyd Stevenson was one of Dr. Francis' most devoted admirers. To add to my portrayal of Dr. Francis, I cannot do better than quote excerpts from a splendid appreciation by Dr. Stevenson. He wrote, "Bill Francis, a master of *aequanimitas*, lived his life contentedly in the shadow of a great man. — To create for others a living semblance of Sir William (Osler), to catalogue, preserve and augment his library, to cherish his memory in every respect, these were the chief objects of Bill Francis for 37 years. It is therefore, perhaps, too easy to forget that he was an accomplished scholar, superior to Osler in both range and precision. — His name appears in a thousand prefaces and notes of acknowledgement. It is written large on the hearts of his many friends. They will not soon forget his patience, his gaiety, his wit, his kindness. All of these attributes survived without diminution five episodes of coronary disease; the sixth killed him in the eighty-second year of his youth."

In appreciation, Lloyd Stevenson described Dr. Francis as having lived his life contentedly in the shadow of a great man. This is one way of putting it. Another might be to say that he lived his life joyously in the warm light shed by a great man. In any event, there is no doubt that William Osler was the overwhelmingly dominant influence in his life. And why not? Consider the background. Bill Francis' mother was an Osler; that was her maiden name. William Osler was her first cousin. When her son was born in Montreal in 1878, she named him William after Dr. Osler, then a member of the McGill Medical Faculty. Bill Francis was not only William Osler's namesake; he was also his godson. And he quickly became more than that. Osler called his young cousins nieces and nephews and repeatedly in his correspondence he referred to Willie Francis as his *favourite* nephew. When ready for entry to university, Francis enrolled at Johns Hopkins where he took both his A.B. and M.D., as well as post-doctoral training. During his years in Baltimore, he lived with the Oslers. Later he was a frequent guest at the Osler home in Oxford and he was there when Osler died. Then of course, as you know, he was the chief editor of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* and Osler Librarian for 30 years. With this background, it is hardly surprising that Osler was always

The historiated initial letter used in this issue is taken from G.B. Rasario's edition of Oribasius, *Collectorum medicinalium libri XVII*, Venitiis, Apud Paulum Manutium, Aldi f. (ca. 1554), *Bibl. Osl.* 430.

foremost in his thoughts. All who knew Dr. Francis will testify that, no matter what the topic under discussion, he would sooner or later, usually sooner, bring the talk around to Osler. All who knew him will also testify that this was a source of kindly amusement to his colleagues. Often we would speculate on how he would manage to involve Osler this time — what device he would use. During the years I knew Dr. Francis, I found abundant evidence that he was aware of his reputation in this respect and was quite prepared to make fun of his preoccupation with Osler.

Never happier than when he was making fun of himself, he knew what his friends expected and he did not disappoint them. This brings me to my favourite story about Dr. Francis, a story with which I will conclude this address. On February 6, 1956, the Osler Society was holding one of its regular meetings. Dr. Harry Ballon was Honorary President and that evening he was a speaker. His subject was "Sir James Hector, the Hannibal of the Rockies." At the conclusion of his presentation, all heads turned towards Dr. Francis. As usual, he was sitting in the big leather arm-chair reserved for him and, as usual, he was asked to open the discussion. I can remember wondering idly how he would go about establishing a connection between Sir James Hector and Osler. I soon found out. Dr. Francis gave his characteristic chuckle and then he spoke. "Osler," he said, "Osler had a dog called Hector."

The Osler Library has issued a guide book. Next summer, we hope to revise it in the light of critical use, and reissue it at that time. Readers who would like a copy of the draft edition are encouraged to write for one.

We are sorry to announce the departure of Miss Nancy Grant, Associate Editor of the *Newsletter* since its inception, and an important contributor to all issues until this one. She will be much missed, and we wish her all good fortune in her new position in the History of Medicine Department, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

EXHIBIT CASES PRESENTED TO OSLER LIBRARY

There was a presentation ceremony at the Osler Library, Friday, at 5:30 p.m., October 1, 1971, during the triennial McGill University Open House. An exhibit area, and four special exhibit cases were formally given to the Library in memory of four members of the medical class of 1941 who died in World War II. Their names are commemorated in this donation:

Fay Broughton Begor, 1916-1943
Robert Bryson Duncan, 1914-1943
Walter George Epply, 1916-1944
Ernest Foss, 1914-1945

The presentation was made by Dr. William C. Gibson, and the acceptance was by Dean Maurice McGregor of the Faculty of Medicine, Chairman of the Osler Library Board of Curators. Class members, visitors, and members of the university community attended.

ANOTHER SALE!

Once again, we enclose a list of books and pamphlets for sale. These duplicates have been priced, and many items are in multiple copies. As in earlier sales, emphasis is on Canadian medical imprints, and on works by and about Sir William Osler. Orders will be filled on a first come, first serve basis. The sale will close 31 January, 1972.

Editorial Committee for the *Newsletter*: Ellen B. Wells, Editor;
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