



# OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGill University, Montreal, Canada

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## Reading Between the Lines: A Glimpse of the Cushing Files and The Life of Sir William Osler



There are many ways in which medical history can be written, depending on the sources of the information, and the identity of the historian. This is certainly the case when the subject is Osler: the source material is highly varied, and different people see it in different ways. Yet Osler's many biographers rarely diverge in their perspectives. Only a few - for instance Charles Roland in his essay on "Osler's Rough Edge" <sup>(1)</sup> - have had the courage, or the appropriate source material, to present Osler as a less than impeccable person. This is not surprising, for the Oslerian tradition is built on inspiration and pride. And if some claim to know some untold truth about Osler's life, serious historians are wary of gossip. Indeed, the way in which medical historians have depicted Osler's character seems quite accurate. Yet surprisingly, the files assembled by Harvey Cushing for the first and greatest biography of Osler yield up hitherto untold antics and anecdotes.

The Cushing Papers comprise research files and drafts for the Osler biography. Describing the contents of these files has been an ongoing project at the Osler Library for a number of years. I have contributed to this project by listing the papers covering the years 1889 to 1900, spanning Osler's Baltimore period, and coming within four years of his departure for Oxford. Osler's appointments as Physician in Chief at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and Professor of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University were important in establishing his reputation as one of the most prominent physicians of his time. During this period, Osler wrote *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, pioneered



Osler with Ramsey Wright, taken in Heidelberg during their 1890 study-tour of Europe.

bedside teaching, and contributed to the development of the residency system. Along with his notable colleagues, he established Hopkins as the flagship North American medical school. Osler's influential addresses on a variety of topics became classics, and he exercised leadership in domains such as public health, medical libraries, and professional societies.

The 799 letters which record Osler's activity during these years remain in the state which Cushing himself organized, and which he described to his wife in 1920:

This is the kind of stuff we're working on - blue [paper] for biographical notes, yellow for book notes, pink for varia, white for letters. It's getting to be a complicated job and my folders which used to sit on the desk have grown to about a yard in thickness. <sup>(2)</sup>

Despite the loss, and perhaps pilfering, of notes and letters - and despite the fact that Lady Osler, following Victorian custom, burned the papers which she loaned to Cushing and which he later returned - the shelf space occupied by the Cushing Papers is still enormous. The lion's share of the files are letters or copies of letters between Osler and his colleagues, family and friends. They include notes to President Woodrow Wilson, to W.W. Francis, to favourite nieces, to his aged mother Ellen Osler, and to a multitude of fellow physicians, scientists and bibliophiles. Unfortunately, most of the letters by Osler are typescript copies, the originals having either fallen prey to Lady Osler, or been returned to the recipients. In his biography of Cushing, John Fulton explains that Cushing obtained the letters by a vigorous campaign of soliciting through medical journals, at meetings, and in person.

Transcribing Osler's illegible, hurried, yet unmistakable handwriting must have been an arduous task

The lead article in this issue of the Newsletter is by Raghu Venugopal. Raghu completed his B.Sc. in Physiology at McGill in the spring of 1996, and will be entering Dalhousie University to study medicine in the fall. His interest in Osler dates from 1994, when he took the course in medical history offered each year by members of the Department of Social Studies of Medicine. In April 1995, he began working in the Osler Library on his own initiative, describing the contents of the Cushing Papers. This summer, he is engaged with Dr. William Feindel on a study of Osler's relationship with Wilder Penfield.

for Cushing's trusty secretaries, Miss Shibly and Miss Smart. In that sense, the absence of the originals from the files may be a blessing for the modern historian. With candor and diplomacy, Cushing confided to "Tanta Grace [i.e., Lady Osler]" that in order to decode the cryptic words of Osler "the sort of things I shall need to have copied will take not only some familiarity with his handwriting but also with medical and medical-historical names and places."<sup>(3)</sup> The *Life* records with satisfaction how he procured the "unwonted luxury" of a secretary to transcribe Osler's longhand.<sup>(4)</sup> An unpublished note from Dr. Ramsey Wright to Cushing, dated 1921, described the many leaves of notes Wright made of his 1890 tour of Europe with Osler, but declines to assist in unravelling Osler's own Parisian lecture notes: "I find the notes occasionally difficult to decipher."<sup>(5)</sup>

Apart from the challenge of Osler's handwriting, there was the additional challenge of writing a biography within the orbit of another person - a person of strong will and particular tastes. Lady Osler was the ultimate judge of what was too private to include in the *Life*, and more than once she had serious differences with the independent-minded, yet tactful Cushing. Whether prompted by Lady Osler or on his own initiative, Cushing exercised some censorship on behalf of his subject's reputation. For example, in August 1893, Osler wrote to Dr. H.V. Ogden:

I cannot make up my mind about the Pan-America [Medical Congress]. I hate Latin-Americans - but I do not like to desert my friends who are in it.<sup>(6)</sup>

On the typescript copy of this letter, Cushing crossed out the word "hate" and wrote in its place "don't care for", and when he published the letter, he omitted the phrase about Latin-Americans entirely - three damaging words, to which Osler himself probably gave little consideration at the time he wrote them.

Would any of us, had we been Harvey Cushing, have acted differently? Cushing was in a myriad ways almost as dear to Osler as his own son,

Revere. At the time of Revere's death in war-torn Belgium, Major Harvey Cushing was the only solace for the tormented father: "What a comfort to feel that you were with the laddie at the end and that someone who loved him and that he loved was near."<sup>(7)</sup> Osler also wrote to Cushing's wife, "Of all the men he is the one we should have chosen to be near Revere at the end. We cannot tell you what a consolation it is to us."<sup>(8)</sup> Lady Osler chose Cushing over W.S. Thayer, one of Osler's house staff at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, to be Osler's biographer. If Cushing was important to Osler, the opposite was also the case. Osler took Cushing all over Europe, introduced him to the best men in medicine, set the bait for his bibliographical pursuits, and showed him a way of life. No one in Cushing's position could have done otherwise than he did.

But now that we have read between the lines, what are the implications? I personally do not think that it need change the way in which we see Osler. Osler's amicable relations with physicians of many religions and ethnic origins is proof against misleading generalizations that he was insensitive or unaccepting. Moreover, do we, at a distance of 103 years, know the complete story behind Osler's comments on Latin-American physicians? Perhaps they arose from the context of a particular medical society, or some military conflict or professional strife of the time. Of course, Osler was a Victorian gentleman, with all the pride and prejudice of the era, and he did have the "rough edge" etched out by Roland. In themselves, the words are harsh, but not entirely out of character. According to Roland, Osler blackballed applicants to some medical societies, and outrageously attacked the Mayor of Baltimore, in off-the-cuff remarks, for negligence of public health. He publicly maligned and called for the resignation of an endearing elderly physician from the executive of a medical society, to the dismay of many - including Mrs. Osler.<sup>(9)</sup> Yet an unpublished letter in the Cushing Papers exonerates Osler from this particular rough-edged act:

Many times I have heard of the speech made by Osler on that occasion, which has been referred to as a very vigorous one - really a personal attack .... Knowing Osler as I knew him, I can not imagine his saying anything personal or vicious; but I can imagine his telling some truths that ought to have been told at that time, and that probably did good.<sup>(10)</sup>

Cushing, interestingly enough, drew a red diagonal line through this exoneration from the successor of the "endearing old man", and did not use it in the *Life*. So it appears that Cushing knew how to tell a good story, and how not to contradict himself. But the implication is that Osler was human, and could make mistakes. In Roland's temperate words,

I propose to parade before my readers some instances of an Osler with teeth, instances that I think diminish his greatness not one jot but add just the needed dash of ill-tempered humanity to make the cardboard saint come to life as a real person.<sup>(11)</sup>

Reading between the lines reveals not only what Harvey Cushing surreptitiously kept out of the *Life*, but what he furtively added to it. For example, on December 14, 1895, Osler invited Dr. James Chadwick of Boston to come and inspire the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland to endow the construction of a new headquarters. A comparison of Osler's original letter with the version published in the *Life* shows that Cushing himself added the closing line, "The profession here needs to be stirred up a bit."<sup>(12)</sup> This was certainly the gist of Osler's plea, and in another unpublished letter of January 1896, Osler reminds Chadwick that "It is very hard work to stir up the men here into action,"<sup>(13)</sup> but it does not alter the fact that Cushing added words to Osler's letter.

Though most who have read Cushing's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography will hardly quibble at the errors he may have made, William Welch, Justice W.H. Taft of the U.S.

Supreme Court, and C.R.L. Fletcher, an Oxford scholar and friend of Osler's, all took him to task. Fletcher was so perturbed at Cushing's use of American expressions like "boost" that he wrote a letter of protest to Lady Osler. (14) Yet Cushing was a perfectionist, a master of infinite detail and a stickler for minutiae. He was, after all, a neurosurgeon, a breed renowned for fastidiousness, and his files reflect this. Though Osler and Lady Osler usually dated their letters with the day of the week alone, Cushing contrived to order them within his file year by year, day by day, and when absolutely necessary, hour by hour! Moreover, he harassed others relentlessly for detail. Even Lady Osler was bombarded with questions about events that had occurred thirty years previously. For example:

I know about Nottingham and suppose you went with a small party for Sunday at Lincoln the day after the meeting. Do you recall anything special about whether any other particular friends went along?... Do you remember there was a bad cholera scare, and even New York Quarantines? Did you go home via Canada and go to the Abbott wedding, or go up there from Philadelphia after reaching home? (15)

One year later, Lady Osler's own equanimity finally ran dry, and she replied to one of Cushing's inquiries:

I haven't the slightest idea. You old goose. Please tell me something. Who was that old man with green hair who went to the 11 o'clock service at the Unitarian Church across the way? (16)

Despite Cushing's enlisting of "the most eagle-eyed critics of [the U.S.] and England", (17) he made mistakes. I had the interesting experience of finding a Cushing error worth \$900,000. Based on a press clipping from *The Empire* of December 13, 1892, Cushing wrote that the friends of McGill University had "[offered] to pay down a lump sum of \$1,000,000," and a generous salary of \$8,000 if Osler

would return to his alma mater. (18) The original clipping, still contained in Cushing's files, records the more modest lump sum of \$100,000. (19)

Though he complained that few took the time to offer constructive criticism of his *Life*, Cushing did not always take criticism gracefully. With delightful sarcasm, he told William Welch that the impertinent Lewellys Barker

has pointed out a split infinitive. I am quite ashamed of myself for not having split more, for I have no objection whatever to split infinitives and in fact rather like them. (20)

The figure of Harvey Cushing himself is completely absent from the *Life*, which is unfortunate, since he played a key role in the life of the Oslers. Unpublished material in the Cushing Papers tells touching stories of their bond. For example, Cushing comments on an Osler letter of February 9, 1899, "This must have been the tail end of a note to E.F.C." The note reads,

I hope you and your father are satisfied with your brother's progress. He really is doing first class work. Halstead and all of us have the most unbounded confidence in him, and within five years he ought to have the reputation of one of the best operators and most successful surgeons of the country. (21)

Medico-detectives might ponder where young Cushing was in 1899, what the initials of brothers of the "Latchkeyers" were, and which physician-father of a Johns Hopkins surgical resident under Halstead would be agog to know of his son's progress. E.F.C. was none other than Dr. Edward Fitch Cushing, Harvey Cushing's brother. Cushing never published the letter. Again, a note dated July 20, 1900, from Osler to Henry Hurd, superintendent of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, provides details of Osler's travels and expeditions in quest of editions of Sir Thomas Browne, but the following lines are omitted in Cushing's published version:

Cushing joins us here tomorrow and we are planning to show

him the sights and we shall take him out for a header off the dock at 7:30. Very glad to see that Welch got the honorary degree at Harvard. We have spent several good mornings at the Hospitals. Cushing is seeing a great deal of Horsley and is a deligent [sic] student at the Hunterian. (22)

Like the Apostle John, who would only refer to himself in his Gospel as "the disciple whom Christ loved," Cushing is found on the pages of his *Life* only under effacing terms like "Latchkeyer" or a certain "speaker."

Though Cushing used almost everything he collected for the *Life* in the published volume, the contents of his files contain many original documents which are foundations of Osler's biography. One example is the thirteen page memoir by Ramsey Wright of his 1890 experiences with Osler in Europe. They detail how in Germany Osler formulated the key ideas for the innovative Hopkins medical curriculum. The 1891 file contains the original letter from H.P. Bowditch urging Osler to accept the Chair of Theory and Practice at Harvard, and listing proposed curriculum changes and other incentives. In a beautifully composed letter of 1892, President Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins thanks Osler for the "inscribed copy of your magnum opus", *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*. The highlight of the 1896 file is an original letter from J.C. Thomas, who after attending one of the many Maryland Faculty meetings orchestrated by Osler, writes, "May I be allowed to take this quiet method of throwing up my hat and shouting, Osler! Osler! long live Osler!" (24) Lastly, a humorous oddity in the 1900 file is a four-page, handwritten letter from H.B. Jacobs to Cushing, dated 1921, telling of his adventures with Osler and T.B. Fitcher in the Dismal Swamp. Oslerians will recall that it was this escapade which Osler embroidered into an absurd account of natives with three eyes who had never heard of Lincoln's Emancipation Declaration!

In my fifteen months of describing the Cushing Files, I unearthed one

letter which Cushing never published or mentioned in the Life. It is a simple letter in which the author recounts his first meeting with William Osler, as a freshman in the McGill medical class of 1899. The student explains that "Sir William was my father's best man,"<sup>(25)</sup> and that Osler instructed his father to send him to McGill. Hopkins required an undergraduate degree, and "if [my father] wanted to make a workaday surgeon out of me, rather than a teacher or laboratory investigator, he better send me to McGill." As luck would have it, Osler delivered the opening address at the medical school that year, entitled "After Twenty-Five Years." The student reminisces:

On the morning of the opening lecture I received an invitation to breakfast from Dr. Shephard whom I had not met. I presented myself at his door at eight-thirty, and you can imagine my delight when I was met by Sir William who put his arm across my shoulder and led me into the dining room. It was just this little kindness to lonely youths in strange places that endeared him so much to all his fellow men.

The author apologizes to Cushing that the only Osler letters he has are a few short notes congratulating him from time to time on his publications. But in the closing lines, he makes a short statement which sums up my own experience of reading the mass of Osler letters, memoranda and post-cards in the Cushing Papers. Ultimately, he also sums up Osler's wonderful nature.

You know the type of letter he used to send, they are very brief and are of no interest to others, but mean so much to the recipient. A word of appreciation from Sir William was like a decoration to a soldier, and I always used to marvel that he would remember to send such a word. With the tremendous amount that he accomplished, he never forgot to encourage the youngsters that he was interested in.... I will never cease to be grateful to you for giving me the opportunity of getting to England to see Sir William last year.... June 21st, 1920.

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## Harold Segall: A Memory Renewed

Over many years, and especially in the final decades of his life, Dr. Harold Segall was an habitu  of the Osler Library. He was also a generous donor of books and special funds, and a frequent contributor to this Newsletter. At his death, his voluminous personal papers came to the Library. These archives constitute a uniquely comprehensive record of one man's life in medicine, from student days, through a half-century of practice, to a retirement "second career" in medical history.

To put it bluntly, Harold Segall was an unabashed packrat, who collected and preserved almost every piece of paper that passed his way. Packrats, of course, are the delight of historians, and Dr. Charles Roland, Hannah Professor of the History of Medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, has mined this rich lode of documentation, as well as extensive taped interviews, to sketch a portrait of an exceptional physician and human being. Harold Nathan Segall: Cardiologist and Historian is one of the latest in the "Canadian Medical Lives" series published by Associated Medical Services and Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

Roland traces Segall's long and innovative medical career, but tilts his narrative strongly in the direction of Segall's personality and milieu. It is this historical context which makes Segall's life so interesting, for his identity as a Jew, living in an environment of social and professional "glass ceilings", was the guiding theme of his career. Segall's own attitude to his Jewishness was troubled and contradictory, and this complicated the tensions between his ambitions and the prejudices against which he had to struggle.

Besides saving paper, Segall provided through interviews some extraordinarily frank and dispassionate insights into his education, work, and experiences. His account of how he learned about the facts of life is both personally touching, and a fascinatingly unsentimental glimpse into the culture of growing up in the early

20th century. His vignettes of the super-rich of Montreal between the wars, many of whom were his patients, evoke a world of luxury and personal service that has vanished forever. Roland's discussion of Segall's income, on the other hand, reveals some interesting statistics: almost one third of the private patients never paid their bills, and a very considerable percentage of his earnings was returned to the community in the form of charitable donations.

To compose a concise biography of a man who was active into his nineties, and who left such a voluminous record, is a daunting task. In concentrating on Segall's character and its relationship to his environment, Charles Roland has made the right choice. Harold Segall was a self-aware and clear-sighted man, whose own commentaries on his world, whether preserved in diaries or on tape, are historical reflections in themselves. The dialogue between the two historians - Segall and Roland - results in an engrossing portrait of an age, as well as of a man.

-Faith Wallis



Prof. Michael Bliss

### **Osler's Biographer Appeals For Documents**

Prof. Michael Bliss of the University of Toronto is one of Canada's most distinguished historians. His diverse interests include business history, political biography, and the history of science and medicine. His *Discovery of Insulin* is the definitive account of Banting's life and work, and more recently, he has chronicled the Montreal smallpox epidemic of 1885. Now he has embarked on a new biography of Sir William Osler, and is in quest of Osler documents not found in the major libraries and archives. He sends the following appeal to readers of the Newsletter:

#### **Help!**

For two years I have been doing foundation research towards a new scholarly biography of Osler. The aim is to introduce him to twenty-first century readers.

Thanks to a Killam Research Fellowship from the Canada Council I am now working full-time on the project, with an outside chance of having a manuscript for the 1999 sesquicentennial of Osler's birth.

Aside from its immense volume, there is no difficulty finding the published material relevant to Osler's life or the major collections of Osleriana in archives. It would be too bad, however, if I missed seeing

Osler-related documents still in private hands, or bypassed archival collections I would not automatically connect with Osler.

So I am very interested in hearing from anyone who has or knows of letters, papers, etcetera, generated by or about Osler, and/or can give me any leads as to other material, in or out of libraries, that I should see. This is a chance to influence what I hope will be the major life of Osler written during our generation (in 1920 Harvey Cushing issued a similar appeal; it proved very fruitful). I can be reached through the Osler Library or directly at the History of Medicine Program, University of Toronto, 88 College St., Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5G 1L4, tel: 416-978-8480, fax: 416-971-2160.

## Friends of the Osler Library

The appeal to the Friends for the 1995-96 academic year concluded at the end of May. The Library gratefully acknowledges the support it has received from Friends, both old and new, who have responded to the appeal for funds this year. Over the year, 239 Friends have given a total of approximately \$25,750. Most of the contributions have come from Friends in Canada and the United States of America. However, very welcome contributions have also come from Australia, Belgium, Chile, Germany, India, Mexico, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

The appeal for the 1996-97 academic year will be made in the October Newsletter.

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 \* Supporting

### Erratum

In our effort to produce the February Newsletter despite staff shortages and other deadlines, we unfortunately omitted to print an editorial box. Our apologies go especially to Dr. Richard Golden, author of the lead article, whose name does not appear.

### New Telephone System in the Osler Library

The Osler Library has a new telephone system, in conjunction with the Health Sciences Library, effective July 29, 1996. Outside callers should dial the new number and follow the prompts on the menu. Each department and/or person will have their own extension. The new number for the Osler Library is:

(514) 398-4475 ext. 094162

This new system is being installed to cut costs. It will take some time for us and our callers to get used to it but we ask for your patience in this new undertaking.

Editorial Committee for the Newsletter: Faith Wallis, Editor; June Schachter, History of Medicine Librarian and Assistant Editor, Wayne LeBel, Assistant History of Medicine Librarian and Assistant Editor; Lily Szczygiel, Editorial Assistant.

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