

October 1st, 2013

Osler Society and Osler Library Board of Curators Essay Contest:
Reflective Essay

In beginning this essay, I followed a similar path that many before me have trod through the life and work of Sir William Osler. Although I did not originally envision an essay focused on Osler himself, the history behind my chosen topic of humanism and palliative care was so enticing as to become the focal point. Much credit is due to one of my references- ‘Sir William Osler's Views on Euthanasia’ by S. Jones, which appeared in a 1994 edition of the Osler Library Newsletter. After reading that piece and realizing the wealth of resources on the exact topic of Osler and death, I quickly changed the thrust of my paper to reflect my newfound interest in Osler’s personal beliefs about the process of dying. While most of my research was done via the grace of the McGill VPN and access to PubMed and Oxford Scholarship Online, the archives of the Osler Library provided me with the original sources that gave rise to the modern digital manifestations. However, there was one resource that I could not find in the public domain and that was Harvey Cushing’s penultimate tome, *The Life of Sir William Osler*. Though I had originally planned on retrieving this book from the Osler Library, my father serendipitously gifted me with a beautiful copy of the work soon after I submitted my proposal for the contest. Therefore my immense gratitude to my dad for that gift which proved invaluable in the writing of this essay.

Throughout the drafting of this essay, I relied heavily upon Cushing’s book, which luckily contains copies of many of the primary sources mentioned in secondary articles. Full copies of Osler’s speeches are found therein and on the various digital Osler resources provided by the Osler Library website itself. Perhaps the most difficult part of the research process for me was knowing when I had in fact discovered too many resources. I believe my original bibliography contained over 60 distinct articles, books, and primary sources. The magnitude of Osleriana available both in print and in digital form is astounding and it proved a difficult task to craft an essay that fit within the requisite 3,000 word limit. As a researcher, I learned that it is easy to find applicable references with the conveniences of the internet and digitized databases but that the true work arises when the time comes to glean the great from the mediocre.

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Finally, one of my best resources throughout the journey of realizing this essay was my advisor, Mrs. Eve Osler Hampson. It was truly a privilege and an honor to get her insight into her ancestor, Sir William Osler, and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know her via emails, phone calls, and letters over the past few months. Beyond her connection to the subject of my essay, she herself proved an invaluable source of information and suggestions about how to further advance the content of my research. Without her input, I may not have looked so closely at Balfour Mount and his influence on the rise of palliative care in Canada nor examined Osler's views on euthanasia. My greatest thanks go to Mrs. Hampson for both her insight and her digital friendship that she extended to me as we worked on this project.

Though all of the resources, both digital and physical, were essential to the creation of this essay, there was no source more important than Osler himself. Although I could not squeeze mentions of all of Osler's writings into this essay (truly an impossible task- one that even Cushing couldn't quite complete in over 12,000 pages), I am happy that this contest gave me the opportunity to read many of the influential speeches, papers, editorials, essays, etc. written by the great physician. As physicians and physicians-in-training, I believe it is important to never forget the roots of the profession and those who came before us. The principles that guided physicians then remain the same now and it is only by remembering the past that we can attempt to affect the future, whether in palliative care or in any other realm of medicine.