

Biography

An Address on the Life of
WILLIAM OSLER,
Baronet, M.D., LL.D., F.R.S., F.R.C.P.

July 12, 1849 — December 29, 1919.

Given in the Chapel of
Trinity College School,
Port Hope, Ontario

by

L. W. Brockington,
C.M.G., K.C., B.A., LL.D., D.C.L.

on

Sunday, October 2nd, 1949,
at a Service commemorating the
Centenary of the birth of William Osler.

R. Palmer Howard, M. D.

WILLIAM OSLER

I have been asked to praise a famous man. His praise is recorded far more eloquently than I can speak it, in the life which he lived, in the lessons which he taught, and above all, in the things which he did. It is, however, fitting that praise should be given in this place and at this time. For Sir William Osler, or Dr. Osler as a grateful world knew him best, was born one hundred years ago and came as a boy to Trinity College School in 1866. He was, you will remember, a Prefect and your first Head Boy. If you had known him when he was a famous man, I think you would have felt that even *then* he was your schoolfellow. For wherever he went and whatever he did, he never let his heart and mind grow old, or his hopes grow dim. He carried his Ontario boyhood with him into all the world. And I like to think that in a real sense he is still your schoolfellow and that the memory of his goodness and greatness is now, and will be for ever, a blessing to this place.

It is going to be very hard for me to speak about his life within a small space of time, and especially in the presence of many who knew him well, and of some who belong to his family and can proudly claim him as a kinsman. No Canadian who ever lived had a clearer title to greatness, or a richer life than Osler, or touched the world of men at more points and with greater distinction. He studied at Toronto, McGill and in Europe. He became the most famous professor of his day in the Medical Schools of McGill, Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins and Oxford. He was the author of the greatest medical book of his time, and one of the greatest of all times, "The Principles and Practice of Medicine". It was translated into many languages, including Chinese and Japanese. He was honoured by degrees from most of the leading Universities of the civilized world. He was a Fellow of many learned societies. He has been acclaimed as the greatest medical teacher of his age and one of the most inspiring in the

whole history of medicine. Partly because of Osler's books, his example, and his work, John D. Rockefeller turned his mind and devoted his fortune to medical research and the relief of suffering. One might almost say that the Rockefeller Institute had its far beginning in Trinity College School.

Osler wrote many books, gave many memorable addresses and published many pamphlets. They number in all nearly 800. Although he was trained in science and in medicine, he was elected President of the Classical Association of Great Britain, whose members are the most learned scholars in Latin and in Greek in those islands where those studies have flourished for ages. His Presidential address amazed them all by a scholarship both wide and deep.

He re-introduced and developed the system of teaching medicine by the bedside of the patient, and nearly every Medical School in the world to-day owes much to his imagination and his work. He has been called the family physician of three nations, and no man in his time did as much to unite the hearts and minds of that Trinity of Nations which means more to us than any others, Canada, Britain and the United States of America. In many far places he always carried with him something of the neighborly kindness of the Canadian frontier, something of the healing strength and warmth of the Canadian sun, something of the clean freshness of the Canadian air that sweeps and sweetens the dusty and the musty places.

On his seventieth birthday a book of tributes was issued in his salutation. After his death a memorial volume of almost 1,000 pages was published in England. It contained eloquent words spoken by famous men and humble men from Canada, the United States, Britain, France, Germany and China—all breathing a love for the man and an admiration for his life and work. In the month of July of this year, one of the great American Medical Journals devoted its whole issue to his memory on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of his birth. I often think

that Britain and the United States almost shame us in our forgetfulness, by their devotion to this Canadian. There are monuments commemorating Osler at McGill, Johns Hopkins and Oxford. His name lives on the lips and in the hearts of countless doctors, nurses, and ordinary men and women who came into the benediction of his presence or have other wistful reasons to cherish his memory. Nobody who ever met him ever forgot him, and how many men and women I, myself, have known, whose proudest reminiscence has been that they once talked with Dr. Osler!

After his death, the Medical Society of Maryland placed this record in the Minutes of its proceedings: "Died on 29th December, 1919, at Oxford, WILLIAM OSLER, Baronet. Physician, teacher, guide, lover of his fellow man. Noble exemplar of charity and tolerance and temperance and work and love; Untiring stimulator and generous benefactor of this Society; Whose sparkling wit and genial, subtle humour smoothed the rough way of life for so many weary spirits; Whose presence banished discord and suspicion. The gap which his absence leaves among us will forever be warmed by the glow of that all-embracing love which radiated from his presence like a halo of light, and brought to all about him something of the peace that now is his." That was the boy whom this School sent out to serve humanity.

He was born, you will remember, in what was then the little Ontario village of Bondhead. Perhaps the wonderful heroism of the last war, in which this School played so noble a part, served to remind us that there are always somebodies in the streets where the nobodies live. And no one knows from what community or household a great man will come. Certainly Bondhead should be a proud little town. And for this, among other reasons. The two Canadians whose names are most honoured and famous throughout the world for the precious gifts which they brought to the comfort and healing of suffering mankind are Dr. William Osler and Dr. Frederick Banting. Banting's father was also born in Bondhead, in the same month and

in the same year as Osler. Truly, July 1849 was a great month for Bondhead, for Canada, and I think for the world.

I have not time to tell you of Osler's father and mother and their family. When his mother was 100 years old, the Canadian House of Commons passed a resolution congratulating her on her own wonderful life and on the fame of four of her sons, one of whom was a leading man of business and finance, another the most notable Canadian lawyer of his day, another Chief Justice of Ontario, and yet another Sir William Osler, Regius professor of Medicine at Oxford. It is sufficient to say that the house of the Rev. Featherstone Lake Osler and his wife, Ellen, was a home of Christian piety, of simple joys, of some hardships, of laughter and of good talk, and of those deep unspoken certainties which join men in love to one another and in adoration and obedience before the ways and laws of God's Providence.

One of Osler's nephews told me the other day how his own mother had brought from that household two lessons which he was never allowed to forget. One was, as his mother constantly reminded him, "If you cannot speak good of any one, keep silent and never speak evil"; the other, "If you are feeling depressed or ill, do not allow your own depression or ill-health to spoil the happiness and enjoyment of others".

It is not easy to gaze through the shadows and to see what sort of a boy came to this School nearly eighty-four years ago. When you are older you will find that it is not easy even to remember much of your own boyhood. Does not the greatest of school songs picture those who sing, looking back forty years after and forgetfully wondering what they were like in their work and their play?

Because Osler's mother and father were Cornish, he was always described as one of those dark Celts who are usually found in Cornwall or the Western parts of Wales or Ireland or Scotland. He was short in stature and had a swarthy complexion. His eyes (which somebody once called the windows of the soul) were full of fire and

brightness and seemed to dance in his head. He was very lithe and brisk and moved very quickly. One of his nieces said that he always came down the street with a swinging pace, with a spring on the ball of his foot—a habit of walking he kept to his last days. As a boy, and even as a man, he was full of pleasant mischief and fond of harmless pranks. As a matter of fact, he left his school at Dundas at the request of the management. When he was at school at Barrie he was known somewhat playfully as one of "Barrie's bad boys". And even when he was at this School he once spent a few hours in what is called the custody of the law, because of some merriment carried a little too far. I expect that during the time he was at school he was most famous amongst his fellows because in his last year he was first in the hurdle race of 200 yards, and of 400 yards; first in the 100 yards "hop" race (whatever that is); first in the mile steeplechase and in throwing the cricket ball. I think he was the sort of boy you would have all liked. At least, he was the sort of boy that people kept on liking for seventy years.

But his boyhood was not all mischief and laughter and the playing of games, although both work and play were to him the best of fun. When he looked back, he always said that three wonderful things came to him while he was a boy at this School. He thought their coming the most important happening in his life. The three things were, a man, an instrument, and a book. You have all heard of the Reverend W. A. Johnson, who was the first warden of this School. Johnson was the godson of the great Duke of Wellington, and had been a soldier and then became a parson and teacher. He was one of those men who had a genius for teaching, especially for teaching the things he liked to the boys he liked. He loved books, and above all was interested in the wonders of the world around him—in the way of a bird in the air, in the beauty of a flower in the woodland, in the delicate tracery of the moss on the stone. He was one of those pilgrims of whom the first great English poet said "gladly would he learn and gladly

teach". A glad teacher likes to meet no one as much as a glad learner, and a glad learner welcomes nobody more than a glad teacher. And so Father Johnson became Osler's friend, teacher and hero. He gave him his first microscope. What Osler saw through that microscope brought near to him many hidden horizons and opened up a wonderland that awaits everyone with eyes to see. Johnson also first introduced Osler to a famous old book, Sir Thomas Browne's, "Religio Medici", "The Religion of a Doctor". The English in which it is written is almost the most stately music which has ever been fashioned from the words of our tongue. It is a difficult book and a scholar's book. It must have been an extraordinary man who could interest a boy in that book. It must have been an extraordinary boy who was fascinated by its language and its teaching. Nevertheless, that miracle happened in this School, and when Osler left for the University of Toronto, his boyish plan became a man's purpose. He made up his mind to become a scientist, a doctor, and a teacher. Johnson rests in the Churchyard at Weston. I hope that his monument is cared for and that the trustees and masters and boys of this School will always keep fresh the grass upon his grave.

During Osler's time at this School, and after that at Toronto, another great teacher, a visitor to Trinity College School and a Professor at Trinity College, James Bovell, brought his wonderful influence to bear upon the moulding of Osler's life. At McGill, Dr. Palmer Howard, the most famous medical teacher of his day, in Canada, possessed the last strong hand that fashioned the pattern of Osler's dedication to the service of mankind.

Throughout his days, Osler continually said and wrote that the purpose of his life, the direction of his toil, and the success of his labours were due to these three noble teachers. When he wrote his own greatest book he dedicated it to them. His speeches and his letters were full of their grateful memory and I am sure that before the last darkness closed his eyes, their faces passed before him

in the proud procession of his life's unforgettable love. I can almost hear them saying to Osler, and Osler saying to those whom he taught in his turn, the words that have always lurked unspoken on the lips of those whose high calling it is to prepare the young for their highest destiny:

“My boy, wherever you are, work for your soul's sake,
That all the clay of you
And all the dross of you
May yield to the fire of you.
Till the fire is nothing but light,
Nothing but light.”

When Osler left this School he passed through the universities of Toronto and McGill and of Europe, to the work of his life. He came back to North America to teach, to inspire, and to make real in action the things which he had learnt at the feet of his Masters. Osler was a great and a good man. In many respects I think he was the greatest man whom this country has produced. It is difficult to define a great man. We all know, don't we, that many men are often called “great” for reasons which do not appeal to all of us. Those reasons sometimes do not agree either with the judgment of time, for riches and power and military glory, and many other things of the world, fade as the years go by. But I think we can say that that man is a great man who first discovers new truths, who crystalizes old truths and new truths into a great religion or philosophy which guides men towards wisdom and fills their hearts with the sense of the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God, in which alone human progress can find a firm foundation. A great man too is one who makes great discoveries or inventions, and thereby enlarges the happiness and comfort of mankind. There is, too, the artist who enriches human life with beauty, with enduring works of music, of literature, of painting. There is another man who by his character, his work and his example, so impresses the men and women of his own time that he lives thereafter in the hearts of

mankind as a lasting influence for good. I think Osler was that sort of a man. The things which he did and which I have already recited to you are themselves evidence of a life rich in great achievement. His greatness lies in that rare combination of noble thought, noble words and noble action. He not only thought great things but he got them done. If he taught and preached, he also organized. Every medical school which he entered was changed and made a living thing by his own joy of life and practical sympathy for his fellows. The medical student, the nurse, the patient, all found a new purpose and a new hope in his presence. Malice and envy were silent before him, and although he spoke no evil and thought no evil of his brothers and sisters, he never lacked courage or allowed personalities to bar the road to what he believed was right and good. He was unique also in his day because he had a thorough knowledge of medicine and science, and the scientific method, yet he was able to clothe his thoughts with grace and power.

He spent all his time with magnificence. He was continually surprising his friends by the things he knew and the use he was able to make of the hours which God had given him. He was punctual in his habits and nearly every waking moment was devoted to the great purpose of his life, the relief of human suffering, the pursuit of wisdom, and the teaching of the young doctor and nurse.

He had a passion for work and in one of his most famous addresses he called Work the master word of his profession. He knew, as most great men before him and after him, that labour is the price which the gods have placed upon everything that is precious. I have often thought too that in many ways the two best educated men of their time were Thomas Huxley of England, and William Osler of Canada. They both combined a deep knowledge of the theory and the practice of scientific truth with a shining ability to express themselves in clear, simple and vital language. Last year I was at a meeting in Oxford and listened to famous scholars stating that the greatest

need of the age was a liberal education, or the education fit for a free man. Such an education was defined by Huxley and fulfilled by Huxley and Osler. I would like to see the definition inscribed on the walls of every university in the English-speaking world.

“That man, I think, has had a liberal education, who has been so trained in youth that his body is the ready servant of his will, and does with ease and pleasure all the work that, as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold logic engine with all its parts of equal strength, and in smooth working order; ready, like a steam engine, to be turned to any kind of work, and spin the gossamers as well as forge the anchors of the mind.” (You know what is meant by gossamers. They are those little films of thin webs that float in the air or are poised upon the grass in autumn, catching the sheen of the dew-drops and the glint of the sun.) And then the description of the educated man continues, “Whose mind is stored with a knowledge of the great and fundamental truths of Nature and of the laws of her operations; and who, no stunted ascetic, is full of life and fire, but whose passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience; who has learned to love all beauty, whether of Nature or of Art, to hate all vileness, and to respect others as himself.”

Osler was that rare sort of man. He left, too, many lessons for us, all written and spoken in words that deserve to survive the rusts and ravages of time. The philosophy of his which I like best is that which he sets out in his most famous lecture, on *The Way of Life*. I have already said how full of life he was, of its joy and its purpose. And so, when he talked to the students at Yale University, he begged them to live in the present, to spend their lives doing and hoping. Sufficient to the day is the goodness thereof. Undress your soul at night and feel the joy that you are alive. Study books, but also men. Keep a fair mind and a fair body, be temperate in all things. He bade them always remember, with Carlyle,

that our duty is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand. He knew also and practised the humility of the seeker, the painstaking care, the persistence that searches for conclusions and does not jump at them, the wonder and the devotion that have always been the glories of true science. He never believed that Science at last would darken men's eyes and harden men's hearts, but that its mission was to bring healing to mankind and joy and leisure to man's life. He also walked in that fine tradition of Medicine that has always laid the gifts of its discovery freely and without payment upon the altar of suffering humanity. When he was a young man he promised that he would never enter the temple of Science in the spirit of the money-changer. He never did. When he was an older man, he could make his own, with truth, the proud boast of the Greek philosopher:

I have loved no darkness
Sophisticated no truth
Nursed no illusion
Allowed no fear.

Those are a few of the reasons why I call him Great. But greatness and goodness are not always the same thing. May I tell you, as I bid you farewell, a few of the reasons why he deserves to be called good?

I think one of the mottoes of his life was

“Two things stand like stone;
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in one's own.”

For everybody who knew Osler or wrote about him or has spoken to me about him, dwells upon the all-pervading sympathy which marked his nature and his work. So many of his deeds were “those unremembered acts of kindness and of love that mark a good man's life.” He knew that that man is the greatest whose heart contains within it the most objects of compassion. He knew, too, that of all the words which men have brought with them from their

wanderings in the wilderness, the sweetest is "loyalty". He never forgot his friends and they never forgot him. Everywhere he went he took with him joy and hope. I wish I could read you some of the letters he wrote for little children who were ill, or tell you some of the stories of his bedside talks in the sickroom of the young, of his cheerful whistle as he entered, of the jokes he made to make them laugh. He had an uncanny knowledge of children. Only the other day a friend of mine phoned to me and told me that when his wife was a little girl she was badly scalded. The great Dr. Osler came to see her, told her some fairy stories, and prescribed for her healing—a box of chocolates!

He had, too, a divine sense of humour—by which I do not mean the biting cruelty of the professional wit, or the smart shallowness of the so-called wisecracker—but that wonderful gift which takes the iron from a man's soul and puts a gentle irony in its place—that sense of humour which turns the tears of life into a rainbow. Servants and humble people all loved him. All humanity saluted him because he was a man and nothing which belonged to mankind was foreign to him. His house and his heart were open to all comers. His residence at Oxford was known by the delightful name of "The Open Arms". In his last year there, he entertained 1,600 men and officers of the American Forces of the First Great War. When his own greatest sorrow came, in the death of a brave only son, he took what he said was the only medicine that could cure him, the medicine of faith and hope and compassion and time.

Always, above the clamour, he heard the still, sad music of humanity. "I laugh," he said, "in order that I do not weep." His coming was a comfort to all for he scattered health and joy with abundance in his path.

In one of his great addresses to nurses and students he paid tribute to those who work for small rewards in lonely places, and told them "your passport will be the blessings of Him in whose footsteps you have trodden,

unto whose sick you have ministered, and for whose children you have cared." That surely is his passport to our hearts and to Heaven. Such was your schoolfellow, William Osler. I hope that he will always be visited by your proud thoughts and that you will cherish the immortal memory of what he was, even though his works may be forgotten—

"He does not die who can bequeath
Some influence to the land he knows;
Who dares persistent interweave
Love permanent with the wild hedgerows.
He does not die, but still remains
Substantiate, with his darling plains."

May the boy who has gone, continue to hallow with his living presence the precincts of this School. May his memory bless forever this land which he loved dearly and served so nobly.

(This address and some of the service was broadcast on the Trans Canada and International networks of the C.B.C.)

Post Script

After the ceremony at the School I received a letter from Mrs. A. M. Matthews of Toronto. The life of Sir William touched hers at many times and places. I would like to record some of her memorable words.

“To know him was to love him, but I sometimes think that those who did not know him must believe that his friends exaggerate his fascination and his loving kindness. He never turned his face from any poor man and he did not ask if a poor man or woman was ‘deserving’. I remember at sea once we had a very poor steward and Dr. Osler gave him a huge tip as he was afraid no one else would give him anything. I was in Egypt with him once and wherever he went he was followed by crowds of little dark children, attracted by him as Canadian, American and English children were, laughing at and with him although they did not understand a word he said. The dullest and stupidest of us were kindled a little by his fire.”

—L.W.B.