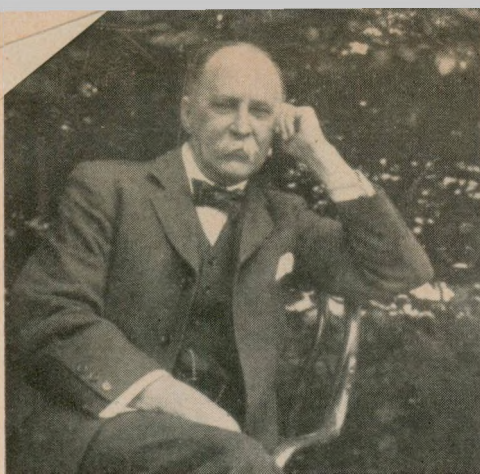




Photograph of Sir William Osler taken shortly before his departure for Oxford in 1905.

MD

PERSONALITY

*"And on his shoulders, not a lamb, a Kid!"
3.6.88.*

Giant Clinician



▪ Forced one day to choose between two promising posts, a brilliant young physician flipped a coin; thus did Dr. William Osler leave Montreal for Philadelphia, taking a long step on the road to international fame.

Although he was to win acclaim as clinician, teacher, writer, scientific investigator and pioneer in public health, he played his greatest role in medicine as a communicator who bridged the gaps between worlds. He was a child of the raw Canadian frontier who became a professor at Johns Hopkins and Oxford; along the way he served as a living link between the medical professions of Canada, the United States, England. In time he bridged an even wider chasm, between the days when Pasteur revolutionized the concept of disease and the era of the scientific biologic laboratory.

In a graduation address to medical students, Dr. Osler summed up the sense of adventurous journey that ruled his life. Said he: "I am sorry for you young men of this generation. You will do great things, you will have great victories, and you will see far, but you can never have our sensations. To have lived through a revolution, to have seen a new birth of science, a new dispensation of health, a new outlook for humanity, is not given to every generation. . . . I have had the rare good fortune to dream dreams . . . and see their realization."

Beginnings. Osler was descended from hardy and venturesome Cornish stock, his ancestors included some notable mariners, missionaries, physicians, one pirate. His

father, Featherstone Osler, was an earnest scholarly man who resigned as a British naval officer to become an Anglican minister. Migrating to Canada he established a wilderness parish at Bond Head, near Toronto; eventually he extended his ministry to settlements scattered over 2000 square miles of frontier. His wife Ellen was good humored and lively, with enormous energy in a diminutive body; typical of her everyday exploits was a church picnic for which she baked three barrels of flour into cakes and bread for 700 people.

The household swarmed with children, four of the eight being destined for fame. Will's brothers Featherstone and Britton became eminent jurists, while brother Edmund achieved leading rank as a financier, was elected to Parliament. Another brother, Frank (the "gray sheep") ran away from home, was shanghaied aboard a whaler, wound up as a reluctant farmer; he and William were particularly close.

Willie was the youngest boy, born on July 12, 1849, not considered overbright but with an overdeveloped streak of mischief.* He was expelled from his first grammar school in 1864 for leading a band in pranks; at his second school he became leader of another group called Barrie's Bad Boys, for which he and a few others were again expelled.

At the third school, Willie and confederates fumigated an unpopular matron with sulfur, for which they were caned, fined and put in jail for a few days. But in this school in Weston the prankster

*He loved playing practical jokes all his life.



Osler, back left, in 1867, an 18-year-old prefect at Weston school.



Osler as Regius Professor of Medicine with Oxford undergraduate.



Beech tree with Osler's initials at Little Gillians, Croxley Green.

came under the influence of the warden, the Reverend William Johnson, who taught him natural history, and of Dr. James Bovell, a physician with a bent for biology; these two inspired the young Osler to choose the path of science and medicine.

Reminisced Osler about the warden: "Imagine the delight of a boy of inquisitive nature to meet a man who cared nothing about words, but who knew about things, who knew the stars in their courses and could tell us their names, who delighted in the woods in the springtime, and told us about the frog-spawn and the caddis worms, who showed us with the microscope the marvels of a drop of dirty pond water."

Emergence. Dr Bovell took Willie into his home almost as an adopted son; the boy reciprocated with mystic attachment to his benefactor; years afterward when distressed or distracted he sometimes signed papers with Bovell's name instead of his own. Recalled Dr. Bovell's granddaughter: "They were both crazy about the microscope. Mother says her life was a perfect burden to her with weird parcels arriving which might contain a rattlesnake, a few frogs, toads or dormice."

Osler entered Toronto Medical School at 19, obtained his M.D. from McGill University in Montreal four years later, then went to London to study physiology and histology under Professor John Burdon Sanderson* at University College. In London he made his first important scientific contribution,

*First registered the electrical impulses of heart.

describing the form and movement of blood platelets which he termed "the third element in the blood." European experience was further enriched with medical tours of Berlin and Vienna, the sojourn abroad being financed with generous help from his brother Edmund.

At 24 Dr. Osler returned to McGill University as "the boy professor," teaching physiology and histology. He converted a cloak-room into McGill's first laboratory, equipped it by spending half his first year's salary to buy a dozen microscopes. He also became professor of physiology at Montreal's Veterinary College where he performed many animal autopsies to prove the need for regulations against trichinosis.

When smallpox ravaged the city, Dr. Osler took on additional duties as pathologist at Montreal General Hospital; at 28 he was elected physician to the hospital, establishing himself at once as a skilled clinician. During these crowded years, he also published investigations on aneurysm, endocarditis, diseases of the heart.

New Horizon. In 1884 he was offered a post as professor of clinical medicine at Philadelphia's University of Pennsylvania; after flipping the coin he decided to accept. He was then only 35, but had already established a reputation and a personal style distinctly his own. Instead of lecturing from the podium he hitched his chair up to any handy table, gathering his students about him for challenging exchanges of questions and answers. Scorning obtuse theories he stressed the specific and practical, bringing patients into the class-

room or leading students on the wards.

His basic approach to teaching was expressed in a now famous Osler aphorism: "To study the phenomena of disease without books is to sail an uncharted sea, while to study books without patients is not to go to sea at all." At every class session, he reminded students: "See, and then reason and compare and control. But see first. Live in the wards."

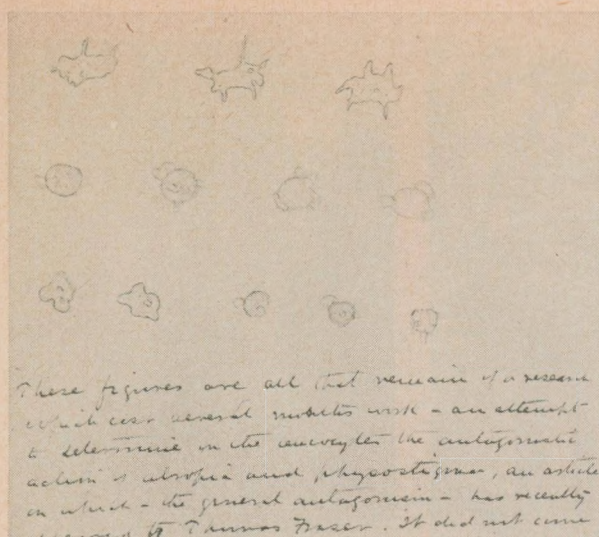
He was opposed to massive drug therapy, stressed the role of the physician-patient relationship. Said he: "Faith in us, faith in our drugs and methods, is the great stock in trade of our profession. It will not raise the dead; it will not put in a new eye in place of a bad one, or knit a bone, but it is a precious commodity, without which we should be badly off."

Zenith. In 1888 Dr. Osler was chosen to be the first professor of medicine at the newly founded Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, one of the Big Four.* He was then at the height of his powers; a vigorous athletic man, short statured but striking, with a drooping mustache that gave him a solemn air, although just below the whiskers he flaunted a brilliant and sometimes garish necktie that revealed the puckish side of his personality.

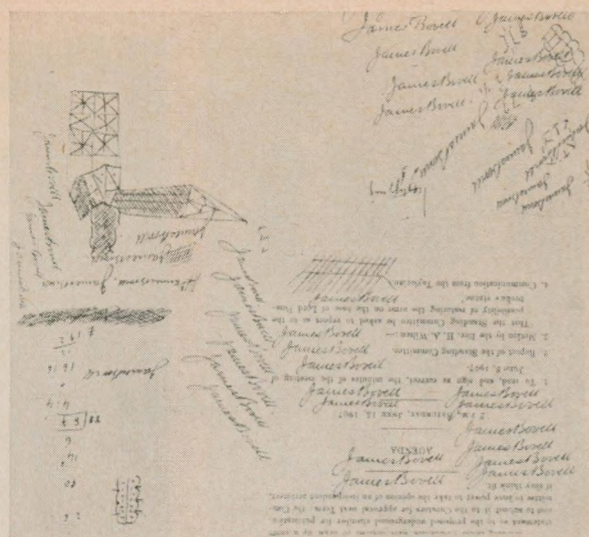
As a teacher, Dr. Osler radiated good will and a charm and cordiality that endeared him to his pupils. He was always poised, expressed himself surely and swiftly, encour-

(Continued)

*William H. Welch, pathology; Howard Kelly, gynecology; William Stewart Halsted, surgery; Osler, internal medicine.



Osler's sketches of leukocytes and notes for a research project conducted in 1874 on action of physostigmine.



Page of a 1907 agenda on which Osler doodled name of Dr. James Bovell who had inspired him to science.

aged his pupils to appreciate the beautiful and noble in life and in their profession. Said a disciple:

Osler went into the postmortem room with the joyous demeanour of the youthful Sophocles leading the chorus of victory after the battle of Salamis.

He not only taught medicine, he also attempted to inspire his students with the dignity of labor and the value of work for work's sake. He left an incalculable impress on medical education in the Anglo-Saxon countries, humanizing the rigid discipline of European teaching.

At the core of his personality was a genuine kindness: when one brilliant young physician bluntly criticized other staff members, Dr. Osler mildly reprimanded him; when the angry young man offered to resign he was told: "Do nothing of the kind. Who is free from faults? Your prospects here are A-one and we need you." Thus did Dr. Osler find a disciple and lifelong friend in Dr. Harvey Cushing, who was to memorialize him with the definitive, Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Life of Sir William Osler*.

His forceful character made Dr. Osler a prime mover in medical organizations; he became a powerful spokesman for preventive measures against malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, syphilis. He once shook his fist in the face of Baltimore's mayor, upbraiding him for official indifference to ghastly conditions that spawned tuberculosis, but usually he preferred to gain his ends by persuasion and compromise.

Dr. Osler published the bulk of his 730 titles during his 16 years at

Johns Hopkins. Partly through practice and partly through omnivorous reading, he polished his once awkward prose into a style both ornamental and lucid; the result was a masterpiece of clarity when he published his classic text, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, in 1891.

The work came as a breath of pure air in a field that had long been dominated by tedious textbooks disseminating outmoded information and opinionated doctrines. Assembling the latest data in clinical medicine, the book included literary allusions, the whole written in a style free from pedantry and pomposity; it passed through nine editions in Osler's lifetime, was translated into many languages.

Six years later a copy of the book came into the hands of Frederick Gates, philanthropic adviser to John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Although a layman, Gates found the work so enthralling he read it all, later advised his millionaire patron to found the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research.

At the time the book was published Osler was courting Grace Revere, a physician's widow*; the story goes that he rushed with a just printed volume to her house, tossed the book in her lap, declared: "There, take the darned thing; now what are you going to do with the man?" She took the book and its author, they were married in 1892, four years later had one son, Edward Revere.

Grace Osler presided over the household with charm and ease, shielded her husband from excessive social commitments, including

*Also a great-granddaughter of Paul Revere.

his numerous admirers who cluttered up the house.

Dr. Osler's other literary work (apart from clinical reports) included a collection of his addresses and essays in *Aequanimitas* and *An Alabama Student*. Among historical works, he edited Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio medici*, wrote on the physicians in the works of Plato, was the author of a series of lectures on the evolution of medicine, produced studies on early American clinicians.

His contributions to the history of medicine included his devotion to the collection of ancient medical works, at a time when medical bibliophiles were still rare. The late Dr. John Fulton told the story how when Dr. Osler heard that the Paris Faculty of Medicine did not possess a copy of Ambroise Paré's famous 16th century work on surgery, he presented them with the priceless work.*

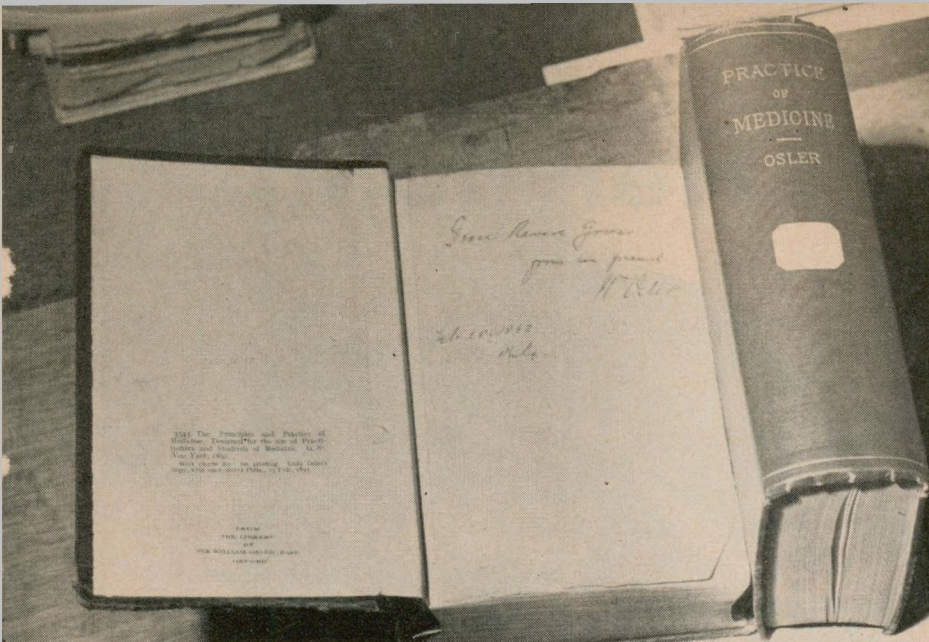
Accolade. When in 1905 Dr. Osler was asked to take the Chair of Regius Professor at Oxford, he wavered; his wife cabled him in London: "Do not procrastinate. Accept at once."

His departure from Johns Hopkins was accompanied by an uproar in the press when an unscrupulous journalist quoted him, out of context, as recommending that men after 60 were useless and harmful to a community and should be chloroformed.† The "yellow press," which was then in its youthful heyday, even invented the term Oslerize for euthanasia.

When the time came to move to

*Dr. Fulton was the messenger on this occasion.

†He had actually whimsically quoted Anthony Trollope.



Copy of *Practice of Medicine* inscribed to Grace Revere Gross whom Osler married. The book sold more than 200,000 copies in Osler's lifetime.



Dr. Osler as "The Saint" of Johns Hopkins, champion of public health.

Oxford, Osler packed a bag and rushed off to New York leaving all the arrangements to his wife. Quipped Grace: "Willie's motto may well be *aequanimitas*!"

Prewar Oxford University was in a leisurely delightful town, its colleges redolent with tradition. At Christ Church, Osler found the rest and equanimity that he badly needed after an exhausting life of teaching and writing.

The Osler home became known as "The Open Arms," was usually swarming with house guests. Innumerable students were invited there to mingle with the great and near-great of medicine. Said one physician who experienced the hospitality: "The Oslers had a positive talent for making people feel at home."

Put to use were Dr. Osler's talents as medical diplomat, his good offices bringing resolution of a quarrel which had split rival medical societies in Britain for 50 years. His flair for statesmanship attracted political attention, led to an offer that he stand for Parliament as joint candidate for the major parties; he turned that away with "It's not my job." In 1911 he was knighted as further evidence of England's esteem.

In World War I Osler immersed himself in the tasks of medical mobilization; soon added was a personal burden of worry and fear. There were 19 Canadian Oslers in France, Revere among them; in August, 1917, word came that Revere had been seriously wounded at Ypres. Telegrams alerted famed physicians all over France; at least half a dozen commandeered ambulances and rushed to aid the son

of "The Chief." Harvey Cushing and George Crile were among those who answered the call but nothing could save the youth; he was riddled with shrapnel in chest, abdomen and thigh; the next day he died. He was buried in Flanders Field.

Osler hid his grief, but at night he often wept. To a relative he wrote: "Our dear boy is gone and we are left desolate. The one comfort is that such a . . . friend as Harvey Cushing was with him. Poor Laddie! He hated war and he is now at peace."

In December of 1919 a bad cold

developed into pneumonia; he diagnosed his own condition, predicted the fatal outcome. His last practical joke was played on two eminent specialists called in for consultation; he slipped out of the house, gathered some gravel which he sprinkled into his urine specimen; he was gleeful when the worried colleagues informed him that his kidneys were in a shocking condition.

On December 29, 1919, Grace found near his bedside a slip of paper with his last note: "The Harbor almost reached after a splendid voyage, with such companions all the way, and my boy awaiting me." END



Osler with his wife and son, Revere, photographed on a visit to Toronto in 1905. Revere, killed in action in 1917, was buried in Flanders Field.