

Readings That Made a Difference

Cushing's *The Life of Sir William Osler*

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My 1925 discovery of Harvey Cushing's *The Life of Sir William Osler* in the open stacks of the University of Iowa Library provides me still with a constant source of delight and inspiration. At that time, I had already chosen the study of children's learning problems as my major interest, but was uncertain as to the choice of psychology or medicine. I was aware of Cushing's eminence as a brain surgeon, but completely ignorant of Osler, so I found the dedication in the biography intriguing: "To medical students, in the hope that something of Osler's spirit may be conveyed to a generation that has not known him, and particularly to those in America, lest it be forgotten who it was that made it possible for them to work at the bedside in the wards."

William Osler (1849-1919) was the acknowledged leader of his time in medical education in Canada and the United States. Medical education at leading universities in the 1870s had a very low reputation in academic circles. At Harvard, according to Henry James, medical instruction then consisted of lectures in nine major subjects: "A student had to attend lectures for two terms. This implied being on hand for sixteen weeks between November and February during two winters." He says that "The classes were not graded . . . first- and second-semester students listened to the same lectures." The more energetic professors conducted a few visits to hospitals. The students never saw their professors at work with patients in hospitals, clinics, or operating rooms and, of course, the professors never saw their students at work with patients. This description fits the programs of many schools of

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education at present—a hundred years later.

In the first volume of the Osler biography, Cushing accompanies Osler through his early life and schooling in Canada, twelve years of teaching at McGill University and Montreal General Hospital, five years at the University of Pennsylvania, and sixteen years at Johns Hopkins. It was a fast-paced life, for Osler combined energy, enterprise, enthusiasm, discovery, delight and dedication. Osler was the exemplar of the clinical professor: forty-five contact hours a week with students was not unusual; mornings in the wards, afternoons in the outpatient clinic, the laboratory, the classroom or the autopsy room, and always Thursday evenings in his library sharing with students his delight in medical history and great literature. In true medical education, he says, "The student begins with the patient, continues with the patient, and ends his studies with the patient, using books and lectures as tools, as means to an end." He says further, "It is a safe rule to have no teaching without a patient for a text."

The Osler pattern of clinical teaching inspired many of my own ventures as a college teacher: the educational clinic, demonstration teaching, laboratory courses, cooperative ventures with public schools, group research projects. The study of ways to increase the quality and amount of learning of pupils in a great variety of fields cannot be approached effectively through general "foundations" or methods courses. Education is a field far more complex than most others; we know relatively little about the brain, still less about the mind; hundreds of variables operate simul-

taneously on each act of learning. Effective instruction requires sequences of clinical experiences, from individual tutoring in skills, to classroom teaching of higher mental processes and affective learnings. Until clinical instruction dominates our field, "beginning with the learner and ending with the learner," there will be no great schools of education. The individual professor who holds this belief will make the best contribution by engaging with his/her own students in the practice of improving services to pupils. To do this requires great expenditures of energy, usually without compensation, and often at the expense of one's social and family life. (Osler did not marry until forty-five!)

As long as he lived, William Osler provided an exceptional demonstration of the use of reading, writing, correspondence and conversation in an active professional life. The various lectures which appear in his *Aequanimitas and Other Addresses* yield numerous quotations for the language arts professor. In his short speech "Books and Men," given at the dedication of the Boston Medical Library, he makes reading an important adjunct to living, but not a substitute for it: "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." He says that "Teachers must know the world's best work and know it at once. They mine and make current the ore so widely scattered in journals, transactions and monographs." He recommends a well-used library as "one of the few corrections of a premature senility . . ." In a day when graduate students ignore re-

search dated before their matriculation, his counsel for diligent research in historical origins is still pertinent. He values reading the works of great people of the past "to keep alive in us an interest . . . not only in their words . . . but in their lives," which we may emulate.

For William Osler, reading was an energetic and rewarding activity; he always had an immediate use for information and ideas. He was surrounded by students, his correspondence was voluminous, and his professional writing was always in progress. "Osler frequently referred to himself as a notebook man—for he read with pen in hand and was in the habit of jotting down a quotation which had struck his fancy or a thought that had come into his mind in relation to something he was composing. It was due to this habit of writing as he read that he finally acquired the style which characterized his later essays. It was also due to this habit that so many brief notes and postcards of comment were promptly sent off to rejoice the hearts particularly of young writers whose fledgling articles he happened to have read." Osler always felt in communication with colleagues distant in time or space: reading brought to his mind great literature and the men who produced it; current journals and correspondence kept him in touch with findings in other countries and the activities of friends and former students. He always kept a stack of postcards at hand, stamped and ready for mailing, and these he fired off many times a day. "A shower of postcards" is the title of one of Cushing's pages. Today's telephone messages do not adequately replace

a gracious or enthusiastic note, nor does a telephone conversation entirely match in permanence and value the disciplined courtesy of a well-written letter.

The second volume of Cushing's biography of Osler deals with the activities of an "elder statesman" after Osler accepted the chair of Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, a professorship founded by Henry VIII in 1546. To Osler's delight, this included the position of Curator of the Bodleian Library, which enabled him to help actively in extending its acquisitions and increasing its services. Osler's lifelong concern with the value of libraries was well-known; more than fifty libraries are listed in the index of the biography.

I find it interesting that Osler considered his introduction of clinical teaching not as "reform" or "bringing new light" but as a *return* to the values of ancient apprenticeship practices. In his address, "The Fixed Period," given on leaving for Oxford, he says, "Personally, there is nothing in life in which I take greater pride than in my connection with the organization of the medical clinic of the Johns Hopkins Hospital and the introduction of the old-fashioned methods of practical instruction. I desire no other epitaph—no hurry about it, may I say—than the statement that I taught medical students in the wards as I regard this as by far the most useful and important work that I have been called upon to do."

References

- Cushing, Harvey. *The Life of Sir William Osler*. Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1925.
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