

Sir William Osler Founder of Anglo-American Scientific Clinical Medicine and Its Teaching

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Sir William Osler

Far too little is known about this great man. If the catch phrase ‘evidence-based medicine’ was then known, he would have been a protagonist. Before his time, Europe led scientific approaches to medicine and stagnation without progress and concentration on the ‘bottom line’ dominated Anglo American practice.

I must declare two vested interests in Osler. In my book collecting days, I found his famous textbook in a small London bookshop for all of five shillings. Not only was it a first edition but signed by Osler. Much later I became secretary of the London Osler Club. We presented the Osler room to the then new Royal College of Physicians in Regents Park. There is also an Osler Club in the United States of America (USA).

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Osler was born in Ontario, Canada in 1849 and as a boy used a microscope avidly to study nature and this led to his extensive clinico-pathological observations and correlations. It trained him to observe, record, tabulate and communicate; a philosophy he later taught his students. At 20 years of age, his first publication was “Christmas and the Microscope”.

As a student, he started his hobby of collecting and reading books of all disciplines. He later wrote, “for the general practitioner, a well used library is one of the preventions of premature senility so apt to overtake him”.

He completed his medical degree at McGill University, Canada in 1872 and then travelled to Europe. He worked with the distinguished London physiologist Professor Burdon Sanderson where he observed that blood platelets were normal constituents of blood. In 1873, Osler went on to a chair at McGill University where he stirred into activity a slumbering medical faculty, introduced modern teaching of physiology and correlated clinical and pathological findings from 1000 autopsies. He mounted many pathological specimens himself. In 1884, he was elected FRCP London and in 1889 he was invited to the chair of medicine at the newly founded Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, where he introduced bedside teaching for students and encouraged them to spend more time in the wards than in lecture theatres. He revolutionized hospital medicine and student teaching along modern lines. This also led to his production of a then novel textbook “Principles and Practice of Medicine” in 1892. This book ran into many editions and was the standard text for two decades. He married that same year and kept open house for colleagues and students. His hospitality, wisdom and good humour were renowned. His extensive library of rare books on history and medicine was much admired. His influence on his colleagues is illustrated by his suggestion to Maude Abbott that she collate pathological specimens of congenital heart disease which led to her famous monograph in 1908. In 1898, he had the rare distinction of election to Fellow of the Royal Society. In 1903, he published “Acquinimitas” still required reading in my student days; explaining self control and presence of mind in emergencies.

In 1904, Osler accepted the Regius Chair of Medicine at Oxford. There, far from relaxing, his dynamic social, administrative and medical activities expanded. Again, he held open house to all comers. He developed basic scientific medical teaching and lectured on medicine and history, still saw patients, was curator of the Bodleian University Library

and Master of the lovely ancient almshouse at Ewelme. This is a place well worth a visit today if you are near Oxford. Honours were heaped on him and in 1911 he became a baronet, Sir William thereafter.

On the literary front, he edited *Modern Medicine* and in 1908 he was founder-editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Medicine*. His many monographs show the breadth of his interests and studies: a few examples are cancer of the stomach, polycythaemia rubra vera (Osler Vaquez disease), abdominal tumours, malignant endocarditis (Osler's nodes), cerebral palsies and chorea in children, filariasis, amoebic dysentery, use of adrenocortical extract in Addison's hereditary telangiectasia and he noted a hereditary factor in angina pectoris. His books include "An Alabama Student" (1908). Of his many public addresses "The Old Humanities and the New Science" was outstanding. His bibliography runs to 779 titles. He was even elected to the British Classical Associa-

tion, a rare honour for a physician. He was so famous that medical visitors to England were advised to see Shakespeare's birth place and visit Oxford to meet Osler.

He taught the value of work for work's sake. His cordiality, goodwill, historical and literary knowledge were unique. His was an example of life devoted to learning, to medicine and to humanity. His only son was killed in World War I in 1917 and Sir William died the same year.

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Media Information

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Sterilization of Tissues using Ionizing Radiation is an invaluable source of information for tissue bankers, transplant surgeons and the safety regulators. It is published by Woodhead Publishing Ltd, Abington Hall, Abington, Cambridge, CB1 6AH, United Kingdom.