



SIR WILLIAM OSLER

Sir William Osler : A Retrospect

The appointment of Osler as Regius at Oxford came as a surprise to many of us. The post had hitherto usually been held by those whose days of active work were nearing their close and to whom, with its comparatively light duties amidst congenial surroundings, it was itself a tribute to the high estimation in which their life's work was held. It involved no teaching either in the lecture-room or at the bedside. The undergraduate taking medicine had no reason to come into official contact with the Regius during his years of residence, and indeed did not, as a rule, see him until coming up for his final examination. Thus, it seemed rather surprising that one such as Osler, still full of activity as a writer and as a teacher, should be willing to leave the scene of his life-work behind in order to take up a post in this country which seemed to offer such scant opportunity of carrying them on.

We little knew the man, or the width and depth of his outlook on all that concerned the encouragement and advance of medicine. Looking back one feels certain that, when invited to occupy the Chair, long before accepting it he had realized that there was something greatly needed in medicine over here, and that by coming to Oxford as Regius Professor he would be in a position from which he might help to supply it.

If such were his views they were quite correct. At the beginning of the century much was lacking in medicine itself as apart from the other branches of our art. There was a complete lack of cohesion between its many centres of activity. Before this period universities with medical faculties had one by one been springing up all over the country, often based upon, or absorbing, older schools of medicine founded in the early decades of the century, but there was little co-operation between them or between any of them and the older universities in any part of the kingdom. Medicine was working, but in a series of separate compart-

ments which had no official means of communicating with one another.

It was here that Osler's vision and wisdom came to the rescue. Within two years of his coming his plans were matured, and by the formation of The Association of Physicians of Great Britain and Ireland in 1907 the first step was taken to remedy the defect. It is doubtful whether at that time any other man or a man in any other position could have carried it through with the same immediate and complete success. As Regius in our oldest university, he was the *doyen* of all those in the universities of the kingdom; as one who had lived all his days in distant lands he had no jealous professional rivals; as a great writer and clinician he had long been familiar to most of us from his valued textbook of medicine which most of us had read. But however influential and respected its proposer, the Association of Physicians would not have succeeded as it has done had it not been conceived and brought forward by those who knew exactly what was wanted and how this could best be supplied. The holding of the annual meeting at each and all the different medical centres throughout the kingdom in turn was itself an inspiration. It meant that personal knowledge of each centre, of the work being done there, and, best of all, of the persons doing it was now to be an opportunity for every member. Views could be exchanged, personal friendships formed and the isolation of more remote centres thus became a thing of the past. It is now more than 40 years since the Association was inaugurated in London with Sir Richard Douglas Powell as its first President. In spite of two long periods of war when the annual meetings had to be held repeatedly in some one convenient centre, it has visited most of the university cities in the kingdom, and this year meets in Belfast. But that is not all; each university in turn has been enabled

to show to the others what it is doing and how it is doing it, a most valuable stimulus to the younger academics.

The second great need, which British medicine had long felt, was the existence of a journal devoted entirely to its own special branch of the subject. Until that time most if not all the medical publications were, so to speak, omnivorous; each and every branch of the subject was welcomed and found a place in them. It was a particularly happy conception to link this new departure and the Association of Physicians firmly together, and to make the *Quarterly Journal of Medicine* part and parcel of the Association, by which it was to be edited and published. With Osler himself as its first Editor, assisted by representatives from various parts of the kingdom, the Journal at once took a leading position in the world of medicine; a position it has ever since maintained. While including a brief record of each annual meeting, it contains papers from all parts of the kingdom. Meanwhile the Association, after more than 40 years existence, flourishes exceedingly. It continues to bring physicians of all parts of the kingdom together each year at its annual meetings, and the primary object of its formation has been more than achieved.

To those of us who had the privilege of knowing him personally Osler was a young man to the end of his life. His thoughts, his interests, and his actions were always directed towards youth, and one feels that in accepting the ancient Oxford Chair

he was largely influenced by the knowledge that he would be in touch with its annual influx of undergraduate youth. As a consultant he was invaluable. His experience of clinical medicine of all kinds coupled with his wide knowledge of medical writings of every country and every age, often enabled him to throw light on a difficult or obscure case. This, however, is but a small part of the object for which physicians of his standing are usually called in. More often, the diagnosis has already been clearly and fully made before their arrival, and the reason for calling them is to assure the patient and the patient's friends that the diagnosis is correct and that in the line of treatment everything that is possible is being done. It was here that one can honestly say that Osler was supreme. Within the short duration of his visit, he not only won the confidence of all, but, what was far more difficult, he won their friendship. To use a slang expression, he was an exceptionally 'good mixer,' who was equally at home in households, however widely different their interests and habits might be. His work for medicine in this country did not end with the founding of the Association of Physicians and its journal. As is well-known to all of us he was constantly helping medicine forwards in all kinds of ways, and he continued to do so up to the very beginning of his fatal illness in 1919. Whatever his years, he died, as he had lived, a young man in thought and in action.

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ANNOTATION

Freedom in Medicine

The processes of life on this globe may not inaptly be summed up in a single word 'change,' indeed it is evident alike to scientist and philosopher that change is a law of the universe, so far as our finite intelligence is capable of grasping it. To the average man, not given to much indulgence in abstract thoughts and speculation, there is something rather terrifying in the implications of this truth, of which at occasional moments he experiences a dim consciousness, usually evoked by some exceptional stirring of his

emotions, or, it may be, by some epochal alteration in the general trend of behaviour in contemporary society. To those whose faith, whatever its outward form, is something more than a self-centred materialism the unity of law, both in the spiritual and in the physical plane, must appear axiomatic. To such individuals the immanence of the fundamental throughout the ephemeral episodes of a changing world is indisputable. However much they may be constrained at times to submit to variations of policy which a considered judg-

ment compels them to regard as inevitable and necessary adaptations to environment, their faith in the unity of law and their allegiance to fundamentals are unimpaired. These are the martyrs, to whose lives their successors owe their enjoyment of the spiritual activities of free-thinking men and women. It is part of the price demanded from them that they have always to endure the taunt of 'reactionary' from the time-servers and opportunists of their generation, whose sententious boast of moving with the times is but a specious euphemism for their own lack of principle.

Some such considerations as the above may well have passed through the minds of the more thoughtful among our readers, whose instinctive dismay at the unprecedented behaviour of many of the medical profession in the last twelve months or more has possibly been mingled with occasional feelings of uncertainty as to just where the dividing line should be drawn between principle and reasonable considerations of expediency. Throughout the history of human endeavour there runs the story of struggle between youth and age, between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, between outmoded conservatism and the more liberal spirit of those pioneers whose advances along the pathway to truth have been blocked by the dead wood piled up by the earnest and loyal hands of so many of their elders. There has never, perhaps, in all the history of British Medicine been any period in which this problem has been more evident or the need for guidance in its solution more pressing than at the present day.

We make no apology for the general discursiveness of these observations or for the fact, of which we are only too well aware, that we are raising vital questions to which we cannot in all humility profess to supply concrete answers. Nevertheless, it is well that these matters should be ventilated and that some attempt should be made to assess at a proper valuation the principles of those who are now, from whatever motives, assuming the rôle of leaders in our professional life. Freedom in Medicine is a noble phrase, instinct with that spirit which is responsible for much on which we pride ourselves as being best and most useful in our country's endeavour for human good. What then do we understand by it? How

shall it be interpreted alike by those in high places and by the lowliest in the ranks of our profession? This is a question in regard to which it behoves each one of us to search the conscience and to review the basis on which the conduct of professional life has been founded. There are, perhaps, two senses in which the expression Freedom in Medicine may be understood, and it is important that we should be clear upon this point. Science knows no boundaries; in her pursuit of knowledge she has no distinctions of race, creed, or class. The right to study and to interpret the secrets of Nature has always been vindicated in the long run, and in our own country official opposition to scientific enquiry, as witnessed by the persecution of a Gallileo, is a thing of past history.

At the present day, however, we are faced with a menace of a different kind. The fashion for centralization, the craze for official planning, has entered into the minds of those responsible for the conduct of public affairs. This is becoming more and more apparent in every walk of life, and the practice of the art of medicine is no exception. Craftsmanship is giving place to mass production, and those who enter on their apprenticeship today know little or nothing of the older régime under which the craftsmen of our art were trained. In these difficult times we would urge our reformers to cast their minds back over the past ages, not indeed in order to welter in a sterile nostalgia, but rather to re-learn from the great philosophers some of the eternal verities upon which true freedom has been built, remembering that even in the pure sciences such as mathematics the first acceptance from a teacher of instruction in their most elementary principles constitutes in itself an act of obedience to authority!

In true freedom, which comes from within, discipline is inherent. This is one of the fundamentals of life, to which there is no exception. No man can teach who has not had to learn, preferably in a hard classroom. None can give orders who has not first schooled himself to obey and to suffer for any disobedience. In this the great masters of the past were wiser than we: their freedom is our heritage, if we will but accept it.

M.D.