

WILLIAM OSLER.

THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER. By HARVEY CUSHING. Two volumes. (Oxford: Clarendon Press. London: Milford. 37s. 6d. net.)

What was it in this remarkable man that stamped itself on all who came in contact with him and renders this vast biography none too long? Osler was certainly a distinguished man of science, but no advance of first rate importance is associated with his name. He was unquestionably a very fine physician. The work of a practitioner of medicine is performed under conditions that make the formation of any final estimate particularly difficult. Yet it is probable that among Osler's contemporaries there were several men who had claims as great as he to clinical acumen and technical skill. By common consent Osler was a most stimulating and inspiring teacher. He was a pioneer of certain great advances in medical education in the New World. And yet he did not invent or originate these methods; he did but improve on those in vogue in other countries. No one can glance at any work by him without becoming conscious of a very charming, allusive, and humane writer, but it is not as a writer that he will live. A man of great energy and intellectual power, an antiquarian, a wit, a scholar and one learned, too, in life, an organizer, a man active and prominent in a dozen different directions, it is by no means easy to explain to those who knew him not wherein Osler's essential genius lay. But those who knew him are in no doubt. To them an image will spontaneously arise which, for the discerning reader who never saw him, will gradually be conjured up by these pages. A little, dark, emotional, sadly joyous figure with wonderful eyes—"eyes that burn through smiles that fade in tears"—eyes that are windows of a soul that all who knew and all who read of with understanding must surely love. Osler was an artist in life and a saint, and these things must make a man memorable whatever his other qualities may be.

Osler had a frontier childhood. He was born of parents of Cornish stock, whose vigour may be gauged from the fact that his mother died at 101 and his father at 88. They went in response to a call for ministers of the Gospel to what was then a wild part of Canada. William was the youngest born and received as good an education as the state of the country afforded. Toward the end of his school days he came under a remarkable teacher, Father William Arthur Johnson, a clergyman of the Church of England with strong ritualistic leanings, who stamped his influence upon his pupil. Johnson was an excellent naturalist and turned his pupil's attention to his own favourite study. It is interesting to note here that Osler never developed any capacity for drawing or graphic representation. This lack, observed even in his school days, is most unusual in successful students of biology. Strange it is that a man so many-sided as Osler, and one before all things an artist in life, was

mortem examinations. Thus it was that he began to lay the foundations of the very wide practical experience which afterwards distinguished him as a physician. His remuneration was insufficient for his needs. Nevertheless, with characteristic generosity, we hear of him paying from his own pocket to complete the inadequate equipment of his department. He started, too, a "Journal Club" among the younger men, to provide a more adequate supply of professional literature. In all the posts which he subsequently filled he repeated this most successful experiment and encouraged the younger men to contribute to the local medical press abstracts from foreign scientific journals. He thus did much to obviate that danger of national isolation to which medicine is peculiarly subject. Not the least noteworthy event of the McGill period is his volunteering for service in a smallpox epidemic, during which he contracted the disease.

Osler was always a keen advocate—and, what is more, an exponent—of what he called "the quinquennial brain-dusting," the periodical study interval in a new country. In 1884 he was in Germany again, this time to visit the bacteriological pioneer Robert Koch, whose researches were then stirring the pulses of the scientific world. On his return he was called to an important chair of clinical medicine in Philadelphia. With his attention now fixed on diseases of infectious origin, he began to pay attention to malaria, which was then common in the great city. He here verified the observations of the French investigator who had recently described the organism of the disease. This placed him at once in the front rank of malarial experts. Osler's real contribution to the subject was the demonstration that the organism of malaria could be used for practical diagnostic purposes by the physician. The Philadelphia period was marked by great activity beyond the range of clinical and pathological work. Osler started a campaign for what is called the "one portal system," the policy of having a single minimal test for entry into the medical profession. Logically the position is unsailable; few countries, however, have as yet adopted it, for it would involve some dislocation of the existing teaching system. While at Philadelphia, a lasting friendship was established with Weir Mitchell, whose name is still popularly attached to a form of rest cure, but who was also one of the most acute minds that the English-speaking medical profession has produced, besides being a poet, novelist, and scholar. Osler was now reaching the height of his powers. He had a vast and growing consulting practice, he was surrounded by ardent pupils, and was actively engaged in advancing knowledge.

In 1888 he was appointed the physician in chief at the Hospital of the Johns Hopkins University at Baltimore. Here was something more nearly approaching an Institute of Experimental Medicine than anything the country had yet seen. Teaching at Johns Hopkins was of the most severe and scientific type. Under Osler the medical instruction there was probably the best to be had any-

COS 417/54.48

①

in general less developed aesthetically than in most other directions.

While at school Osler joined the school doctor, James Bovell, in researches on Diatoms and on the exquisite animal forms known as Polyzoa. The delicate intricacy of these microscopic objects made a deep impression on his mind and stamped it with a lasting love of nature. In 1867 he entered Trinity College, Toronto, and came into still closer contact with Bovell, who taught medicine there. Osler had hitherto been destined for the Church, but he now formed a resolution to enter the medical profession. Bovell was a man of brilliance and versatility, but incapable of persistence of purpose. His greatest achievement was his pupil. It is an odd fact, indicative of the impressibility of the lad, that throughout life Osler, when musing or puzzled, would scribble his teacher's name. In 1870 he entered the McGill Medical School at Quebec. He went armed with a letter from Bovell to Palmer Howard, then Professor of Medicine at McGill, the third early teacher who had an important influence on the young man. Osler's affection for McGill remained with him to the end. To it he left the magnificent library, the accumulation of which, on an original and individual plan, was one of the main interests of his declining years. He graduated in medicine in 1872, and at once proceeded to study in Europe, his expenses being largely met by the generosity of an elder brother.

Few great physicians have been so far-sighted in designing their own training. The world was before him and he spent several years in independent and intensive study at the very best European schools. At University College, London, he came in contact with the most eminent English-speaking physiologist of the day, Burdon Sanderson, whom he ultimately succeeded as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. It was in the laboratory at University College, while working with the present Professor of Physiology at Edinburgh, that Osler made his first important scientific observations, those on the so-called "blood platelets." While in England he paid a pious visit to Norwich to see the relics of the author of the "Religio Medici." The work of the great stylist retained a perpetual fascination for him, and Sir Thomas Browne exerted an easily traceable effect on Osler's manner of thought and of writing. At Berlin the young physician was immensely impressed by Virchow, a man of nobly liberal spirit, not dissimilar to that which informed Osler himself.

On his return to Montreal he was soon appointed to the Chair of the "Institutes of Medicine"—a title then often given to what we now call Physiology. Having no clinical position he volunteered for pathological work in the Montreal Hospital, where he performed a very large number of post-

where in the world. The most active and crowded years of his life were spent in connexion with this Hospital School. Under his influence much was borrowed from the German systems and, in particular, a hierarchy of long-term hospital residents took the place of the usual brief period of internship or "house appointments," as we call them in this country. Along with scientific developments, there came an element which always appealed to the great teacher. Historical studies were introduced and an historical club with monthly meetings was founded. For many years the publications of Johns Hopkins were noteworthy for this enlightening historical spirit. While at Johns Hopkins, Osler published, in 1892, his greatest literary effort, his text-book of medicine. That work marks a period in the teaching of medicine in English-speaking countries. It was by far the clearest, best written, best arranged, and most "first-hand" work of the kind. It became immensely popular, passed through a great number of editions, and was translated into French, German, Spanish, and Chinese. In previous medical text-books the treatment advised had been largely traditional. Certain modes of treatment had long been associated with certain diseases, and these were recounted, often in a mechanical fashion. To such methods Osler applied a highly trained and experienced critical faculty. He sought to teach only what was actually known and reasonably secure in the science of medicine, and not what was conjectured, vaguely hoped for, or merely customary. The result was to create a general impression of the extreme paucity of really scientific knowledge of the nature and treatment of disease. In the event Osler's reasoned scepticism had very tangible results, for it drew the attention of the Rockefeller trustees, who thereon decided to devote their vast resources to promoting the study of medicine on a fully scientific basis. While at Baltimore, Osler contracted his ideally happy marriage with the lady who survives him. Work crowded on him, he became the most sought-after physician in the country. When at last called to the Regius Professorship at Oxford, in 1905, his name was a household word among the medical profession throughout the world. Honours were now poured at his feet, but it would be a mean and low estimate of the man that would lay emphasis on these. No man ever bore honours more lightly. Success is the surest test of a man's soul, and Osler in his declining years remained eager of mind, humble of soul, gay of courage, universally sympathetic—yet always touched with an essential melancholy.

Messrs. Kegan Paul will shortly continue their "History of Civilization" series with a volume entitled "The Dawn of European Civilization," by V. Gordon Childe—an illustrated survey of archæology from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and from England to Russia.